

MODERN POETS
AND
CHRISTIAN TEACHING

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

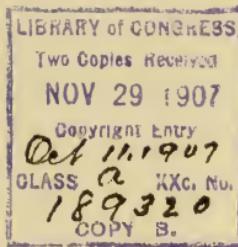
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Elizabeth Barrett Browning

TO
THE DEAR MEMORY OF
E. B. B.
TO KNOW HER BETTER HAS BEEN TO
LOVE HER MORE AND TO
LOVE GOD MORE

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PREFATORY NOTE

IT seems impossible to consider the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning apart from her life and personality. Perhaps we may say the same of any poet; yet in her case the poetry so vividly glorifies the life, and the life so clearly elucidates the poetry, that the temptation is imminent at every point to drop into the story-like and alluring sidepaths of her biography. If the reader feels that this volume errs too frequently in that respect, he is asked to recall the words of another poet:

What's done we partly may compute,
But know not what's resisted.

On the other hand, for the benefit of another kind of reader who may like to relate the poems referred to in this volume to some definite structure of her life, a chart of the most important events is appended and an index will lead to the identification of poems, places, and incidents mentioned in the text. The edition of her works referred to in the notes in this volume is the Cambridge Edition (Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1900). References to Mrs. Browning's correspondence are made to the two volumes of her "Letters," edited by Frederic G. Kenyon (The Macmillan Company,

1897); to Volume I of the "Life, Letters, and Essays of Elizabeth Barrett Browning," containing the letters addressed to Richard Hengist Horne (New York, Worthington Company, 1889); and to the two volumes of the "Letters of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1845-46" (Harper & Brothers, 1899). However, in this book no deliberate attempt is made at literary criticism or at biography, except as they throw light upon the poet's thought. Whenever possible Mrs. Browning's own language is used with her own italics and expressive little dots; and the letters have been searched for illustrative passages.

CHAPTER I

LIFE AND CREED

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING richly deserves a place in a group of poets who gave expression through their divine art to Christian teaching. She was essentially a religious poet; the spirit of religion pervades and irradiates every page she wrote. But it was not any monastic ideal, any spirit of worship in selfish seclusion, that she set forth. Her real spirit lived in the world; she was part of the very current and passion of it, and she transmuted the humblest elements of life as she knew it into heavenly radiances. Still there was sometimes the ecstasy of the devotee in her hours of inspiration, and the rapture of the seer of visions. She lived with visions for her company, she says in one of the "Sonnets from the Portuguese," and they were "gentle mates" to her; she would not ask for sweeter music than they made. Nor would we!

One of several misapprehensions in the public mind with regard to the poetry of Mrs. Browning is that it is permeated with a spirit of melancholy. Quite the contrary is the case. Her poems are earnest; they are filled with religious devotion; but to all who do not think that a religious motive is

in itself a doleful thing they are joy-giving and courage-inspiring. She takes the fact of sorrow in the world for granted—as who must not!—but she then proceeds in every way to lessen it by giving consolation, the best consolations that she can draw from her own personal experiences, and from her visions of spiritual possibilities. Let us sing, she cries, who wear immortal wings within.

And her life was indeed rich in the sorrows that make sympathy grow and bloom. Though always intensely vibrating to the world outside, she lived for years an invalid. Her health is believed to have been first broken by an injury to the spine received in her early youth. Then her delicacy was increased by a shock which came in 1840, at the death of a brother, an event which happened under peculiarly painful circumstances—a drowning in a smooth sea, beneath a fair sky, and almost before her very eyes. So for many years she was confined to her room at her father's house in London; and that father, an autocrat in his family, made up his mind that Elizabeth's fate was to fade gradually and beautifully away to a poetic and spiritual translation, and he could not, it seems, grasp the idea of a possible recovery for her. Therefore he thought she should be made to let her mind dwell upon her end; and, praying nightly by her bedside, he resented any suggestion other

than an early death for her. In such an atmosphere she spent the earlier years of her womanhood, hermetically sealed as it were from any breath of health-giving pure fresh air and shrouded in the fogs of London. At last there came a physician's decision that she could not live through another winter in that climate; and here it must be regretfully admitted that her wealthy father refused to allow her to go to a climate better adapted to her needs, though there were brothers and sisters who could have conveniently accompanied her. It was this seeming disregard for her life and health which broke the daughter's heart and which was finally the deciding element in her life plans. Had Elizabeth Barrett lived in our day of the woman doctor and the fresh-air treatment, it is almost certain that she would not only have been lifted out of the habits of invalidism, but would have been repaired and strengthened into vigorous bodily activity. This seems all the more likely from the fact that her health did steadily improve from the day when Robert Browning rescued her and bore her away to a climate where she could live and be comparatively well. Her marriage brought joy, it brought Italy and the normal sunlight and outdoors she needed. It was not long before she was climbing mountains.

It seemed absolutely necessary to mention the

father of Elizabeth Barrett; and since that is done, another word must be added. It is now well known that when a daughter of his thought of marriage, that child risked an anger on his part so extreme that it amounted to an insanity. Such an act was a defiance of his fatherly authority and a transference of loyalty to another head. Other fathers have had the same notion of parental rights: it was unfortunate that to this delicate treasure of poetic life should have been assigned a father of this kind.

The whole story of her course is minutely written out in her letters to Robert Browning and to some of her intimate friends at the time that she took the great step of leaving the roof of that father and so cutting the tie that bound her to him. All the world may know the incidents of that passage, and the whole world has justified her in every detail. Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett were married in Marylebone Church between quarter to eleven and quarter past eleven in the forenoon, on the twelfth of September, 1846, and immediately thereafter they separated until such time as they could arrange to go south together. At one o'clock of that day he is writing the first letter to his wife, and he says: "Words can never tell you, however—form them, transform them, anyway,—how perfectly dear you are to me—perfectly dear

to my heart and soul. I look back, and in every one point, every word and gesture, every letter, every silence—you have been entirely perfect to me—I would not change one word, one look. My hope and aim are to preserve this love, not to fall from it—for which I trust to God who procured it for me, and doubtlessly can preserve it.” With this poet lover we can also say that we would not change one of Elizabeth Barrett’s words, one of her looks—she has been entirely perfect to us also, entirely perfect to the judgment of the world.

This was the second heartbreak of her life, and the pain lasted until her death. Many times she wrote from Italy to her father, but when she came to England the letters were sent back to her unopened. And this was the more poignant grief to her because of the fact that some of the envelopes had been marked with the black border of mourning.

Out of the great pity that everyone must feel for the sorrows heaped upon the frail life of the great woman and poet, must be born a gratitude that such experiences could result in the development of that sympathy, that bravery, that insight, which are her treasured qualities, while none of these rebuffs of fate could destroy her independence of mind and her passion for poetry, or weaken her power to act which rose so gloriously effective when

she took her life in her hands and went forth to Italy with that perfect lover and husband, Robert Browning. The end of the story is the justification of her every deed. Mrs. Jameson, with whom the newly married pair journeyed southward, said, "You are not improved, you are transformed!" And the renewal of health, the development of power both mental and physical, and the broadening and deepening of experience which were the results of her change of home, together with the illumination of life that came with the birth of her child, make an unanswerable plea—if such were needed—to relieve her of every trace of blame. Beyond the nobility of her husband as a man and his genius as a poet she placed the "strange straight sympathy" which united them on all subjects. "I take it for pure magic—this life of mine," she said; "surely nobody was ever so happy before." Her perfect happiness was justification enough. But, in fact, a justification would not have been needed, had the results been less happy; yet it is a peculiar satisfaction to be able to bereave the world of every imaginable ground for cavil.

These romantic features in Mrs. Browning's life have made perhaps an overcurious interest in her personality; however this may be, there is scarcely a poet whose life is so fully laid before the world.

This is well. There is not a flaw to conceal. Her poetry has been an inestimable gift to all people in the world who can take life through poetry, and through them to those who cannot, to the uplifting in the end of all; and her life, by affording the example of a perfect and equal union of the loftiest and most highly endowed human souls, which was at first in this case a hazardous experiment, but yet which has proved at every moment and in the end, from every point of view, a complete and triumphant success—this is a gift to the world which in preciousness is almost a rival to the poetry. And that this should not be lost to a world acutely in need of proof to establish its belief in such a possibility is ample justification for giving forth those sacred love letters, although that involved a publicity from which many true lovers of the two poets shrank at the time. If it is of supreme value to the progress of humanity that men and women shall learn to live happily together, founding homes that give a foretaste of heaven and that bear on to the coming generations a torch of faith and hope, then the love letters together with the other letters and poems bearing on the relations of these two great poets form one of the greatest treasures that the human race possesses.

Beyond the intensification of her power of sym-

pathy with the sorrowing, none of Mrs. Browning's private griefs left impress upon her poems. There is no reference to her father save in one dedication, and then only with the most filial tenderness and respect. A poem called "De Profundis," written soon after the death of her brother though not published until 1860, may be taken as having shown the triumph of her spirit in that hour of almost unbearable grief; but this is the sole poem that may be supposed to refer to that dark passage in her days that "must go on."

Whatever's lost, it first was won;
We will not struggle nor impugn.
Perhaps the cup was broken here,
That Heaven's new wine might show more clear.
I praise Thee while my days go on.

If other great sorrow pierced her heart the world has not heard the cry, for she shows the greatest refinement and seclusion of spirit in regard to her personal life. Even the love sonnets, the story of her own love, she did not show to Robert Browning until after their marriage; then upon a certain day, as Browning many years after told a friend, she thrust them secretly into his pocket and ran away while he read them; and when upon his insistence they were printed it was under the disguise, or half-disguise, of the now so well known name, the "Sonnets from the Portuguese." She had sometime been playfully called by Robert

Browning his “own little Portuguese”; ¹ hence the poetic title to the poem.

It is evident to the reader of Mrs. Browning’s poetry that she must have been reared among the conventions of strictly evangelical orthodoxy. In the Barrett household the child Elizabeth was surrounded by the atmosphere of the congregational dissenting church; and through life, in her correspondence, she always says, “my friends the dissenters.” “I am a dissenter,” she declares frequently, and sometimes adds, “and a believer in a universal Christianity.” “Truth (as far as each thinker can apprehend) and love” made up her idea of a church creed even in the earlier days when she seems to have been surrounded by fierce wranglings among minor divisions of sects.

We may think of her in young childhood as going to a little chapel with her father; but even then, it seems, it was by her own choice that she did so. There must have been a great spirit of independence in the family, for she speaks of the “many-colored theologies” of the house; and she chose her sect “from liking the simplicity of that speaking and praying without books—and a little, too, from disliking the theory of state churches,”

¹In allusion to her poem “Caterina to Camoens.” The theme of this poem is taken from Portuguese literary history, and its subject is several times exquisitely touched upon in the letters of Robert Browning to Elizabeth Barrett.

she said afterward to Robert Browning. In 1854 we find her attending "Bible meetings" and "church and London missionary meetings." She says of a sermon by Dr. Chalmers that it was truer to Scripture than she was prepared for, though there seemed to be some want on the subject of the work of the Holy Spirit on the heart.

She had many interviews with people who sought to win her to believe in some special shade of dogma. People were always "sending her New Testaments to learn from—with very kind intentions." But with a most humble spirit and an absolute lack of bitterness in discussion, there was yet in her a dogged persistence and a determined belief in what she did believe. She was incapable of relinquishing a conclusion. Still, acrimonious controversy was to her detestable. Of someone who was coming to tear to pieces all her elaborate theology, she said: "If I were to see her, I would not argue with her; I would only ask her to let me love her. . . . It is better to love than to convince. They who lie on the bosom of Jesus must lie there together." This was in 1834; in 1843 she said again: "I may say of myself that I hope there is nobody in the world with a stronger will and aspiration to escape from sectarianism in any sort or sense, when I have eyes to discern it; and that the sectarianism of the national churches

to which I do not belong, and of the dissenting bodies, to which I do, stand together before me on a pretty just level of detestation." "There may be sectarianism in the very cutting off of sectarianism," she thought. She was really at heart a dissenter—it was no mere name to her. Especially did she take her stand strongly against empty ritualism. "I can never see anything in these sacramental ordinances," she said, "except a prospective sign in one (Baptism), and a memorial sign in the other (the Lord's Supper), and could not recognize either under any modification as a peculiar instrument of grace, mystery, or the like. The tendencies we have toward making mysteries of God's simplicities are as marked and sure as our missing the actual mystery upon occasion. God's love is the true mystery, and the sacraments are only too simple for us to understand."

By 1845 there seems to have been a loosening of some of the bands of convention that had stood about her in earlier life. About that time we find her writing to her great friend, Hugh Stuart Boyd, words that show this change. Speaking of an old acquaintance who had joined the Plymouth Brethren, "Of course," she says, "— has straitened his views since last we met, and I by the reaction of solitude and suffering, have broken many bands which held me at that time. He was always

straiter than I, and now the difference is immense. For I think the world wider than I once thought it, and I see God's love broader than I once saw it." Soon after this she tells Robert Browning, in one of those full impulses of self-revelation which we are so rarely privileged to read in the wonderful love letters, that she feels unwilling to put on any of the liveries of the sects. She told him that she cared very little for most dogmas and doxies in themselves, that she believed that there was only one church in heaven and earth, with one divine High Priest to it; and that therefore she hated from the roots of her heart all that rending of the garment of Christ which Christians are so apt to make the daily week-day of this Christianity so-called. But this harsher mood could not last many minutes in her gentle spirit. "Wherever you go, in all religious societies, there is a little revolt, and a good deal to bear with—but it is not otherwise in the world without; and, *within*, you are especially reminded that God has to be more patient than yourself, after all." Then follows one of those illuminative passages that make the love letters like a sacred missal. "The truth, as God sees it," she says, "must be something so different from these opinions about truth—these systems which fit different classes of men like their coats, and wear brown at the elbows always! I believe

in what is divine and floats at highest, in all these different theologies—and because the really Divine draws together souls, and tends so to a unity, I could pray anywhere with all sorts of worshipers, . . . those kneeling and those standing."

On the other hand, she was not blind to the faults on the dissenting side. The formula was rampant among them, too; there was a narrowness among them which was wonderful, an "arid gray Puritanism in the clefts of their souls"; but it seemed to her clear that they knew what the liberty of Christ meant far better than those who called themselves churchmen, that they stood altogether on higher ground. She preferred, she said, to pray in one of "those chapels where the minister was simple-minded and not controversial"; she liked "beyond comparison best" their "simplicity, . . . the unwritten prayer, . . . the sacraments administered quietly and without charlatanism! And the principle of a church, as they hold it, *I* hold it too, . . . quite apart from state-necessities, . . . pure from the law." She used even a stronger expression: "You feel, moreover, bigotry and ignorance pressing on you on all sides till you gasp for breath like one strangled." Then with a touch of her usual optimism that ever will come buoyantly to the surface, she exclaims, "When the veil of the body falls, how we shall look into each

other's faces, astonished, . . . after one glance at God's!"

In "Casa Guidi Windows"—with this work we reach the year 1851—we may consider that she is speaking in her own name and for herself when she sets down the following passage—a passage that may be taken as a sort of creed:

My words are guiltless of the bigot's sense;
My soul has fire to mingle with the fire
 Of all these souls, within or out of doors
Of Rome's church or another. I believe
 In one Priest, and one temple with its floors
Of shining jasper gloom'd at morn and eve
 By countless knees of earnest auditors,
And crystal walls too lucid to perceive,
 That none may take the measure of the place
And say, "So far the porphyry, then, the flint—
 To this mark mercy goes, and there ends grace,"
Though still the permeable crystals hint
 At some white starry distance, bathed in space.
I feel how nature's ice-crusts keep the dint
 Of undersprings of silent Deity,
I hold the articulated gospels which
 Show Christ among us crucified on tree.
I love all who love truth, if poor or rich
 In what they have won of truth possessively
No altars and no hands defiled with pitch
 Shall scare me off, but I will pray and eat
With all these—taking leave to choose my ewers—
 And say at last, "Your visible churches cheat
Their inward types; and, if a church assures
 Of standing without failure and defeat,
The same both fails and lies."

The above may be a creed; it is also an arraignment; views on this and kindred phases were the

result of serious study that led to opinions definite and fixed. All churches share alike, however, in her many passages of reproof.

What *are* these churches? The old temple-wall
Doth overlook them juggling with the sleight
Of surplice, candlestick, and altar-pall;
East church and west church, ay, north church and south,
Rome's church and England's,—let them all repent,
And make concordats 'twixt their soul and mouth,
Succeed Saint Paul by working at the tent,
Become infallible guides by speaking truth,
And excommunicate their pride that bent
And cramped the souls of men.

And in the following section she is still more positive:

Priests, priests,—there's no such name!—God's own, except
Ye take most vainly. Through heaven's lifted gate
The priestly ephod in sole glory swept
When Christ ascended, entered in, and sate
(With victor face sublimely overwept)
At Deity's right hand, to mediate,
He alone, He forever. On his breast
The Urim and the Thummim, fed with fire
From the full Godhead, flicker with the unrest
Of human pitiful heart-beats. Come up higher,
All Christians! Levi's tribe is dispossess.
That solitary alb ye shall admire,
But not cast lots for. The last chrism, poured right,
Was on that Head, and poured for burial
And not for domination in men's sight.

This thought of “domination” is what awoke the greatest apprehension in the mind of the poet-seer, and aroused in her emotions that concentrated themselves in the battle-cries of her later days.

In matters purely religious, however, the development of her thoughts and opinions seems to have been in the direction of broadening and charity rather than of fixedness and minute distinctions in statement of belief. It is about the time of the writing of "*Casa Guidi Windows*" that she is saying in a letter to an American friend: "I hold to Christ's invisible church as referred to in Scripture and to the Saviour's humanity and divinity as they seem to me conspicuous in Scripture." And this is as strong a line as she seemed inclined in later days to make. There is no doubt that this direction of development began before Elizabeth Barrett met Robert Browning, but it is possible that the sympathy of her husband was a liberalizing influence. In 1858 she was in Rome at Christmas time and was able to go to Saint Peter's to hear the silver trumpets—"a wonderful event for me," she says, and adds that she "never once thought of the Scarlet Lady . . . nor anything to spoil the pleasure," but enjoyed it both æsthetically and devotionally, putting her own words to the music. Evidently her conscience is a little troubled at this, for she adds, "Was it wise, or wrong?"

A thinker so prominent and one with so free and terrible a power of reproof could not escape detraction. She stood between those less liberal and those more so, owned and execrated in turn

by each. She said in 1861: "I have been called orthodox by infidels, and heterodox by church-people; and gone on predicting to such persons as came near enough to me in speculative liberty of opinion to justify my speaking, that the present churches were in course of dissolution, and would have to be followed by a reconstruction of Christian essential verity into other than these middle-age, scholastic forms. Believing in Christ's divinity, which is the life of Christianity, I believed this. Otherwise, if the end were here—if we were to be covered over and tucked in with the Thirty-nine Articles or the like, and good-night to us for a sound sleep in 'sound doctrine'—I should fear for a revealed religion incapable of expansion according to the needs of man. What comes from God has life in it, and certainly from all the growth of living things, spiritual growth cannot be excepted." It was not long after the writing of this that her pen was laid aside forever.

By many it will be thought a misfortune to have been born into the strait theological inclosure that surrounded Elizabeth Barrett in her youth. The miracle was that out of this Tory coop she sprang an ardent and fiery liberal and republican; from this spiritual handicap she flamed forth a torch of spiritual illumination. It must be recalled that in that Promethean shell of illiberality could burn a

fire at white heat; and from it could come many a light to lighten the world. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was, in fact, a part of the great mid-century movement to revivify the spiritual side of life. It is not more strange that she should appear from that Wimpole Street home than that a spiritual war-cry should come from the mediævalism of Oxford and that Rossetti's Mary Magdalene at the door of Simon with George Meredith's face as the model for that of the Christ, should proceed from the art—or no-art—of the early part of the century. To respiritualize life, art, poetry—Newman, Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning—the three names may be placed together. Each followed the gleam that the inner soul threw upon the path; each looked upward and onward to a new revelation of life and so held forth a torch to the sodden and darkened but swiftly awakening century.

The poetry of Mrs. Browning is not to be valued solely as the work of a woman in distinction from what it would have been had it been written by a man. She has perhaps spoken of some things a man might not have mentioned. Swinburne said there never was and never could be another such baby in type as the one in "Aurora Leigh," and he added that no words could ever be adequate to give thanks for such a gift as that. Perhaps if

Mrs. Browning had written those words about Swinburne she would not have spoken of putting a "baby in type"; she would surely, however, have offered thanks for the fact that Swinburne has found time to hunt rhymes for the impossible rhyme "baby," and has used them so exquisitely in his thirty or more songs and sonnets upon the baby's life and loveliness, all his birthdays up to the ninth, his pity, laughter, battles, future, his footsteps, his hands and O, above all, his feet, for all of which many, many thanks from all the world! It seems, then, that the child is interesting to poets who are not women; it is the century of Pestalozzi and of Froebel; the century for setting children, along with other slaves, free; the time when we begin to see that the child is not only the father of the man but that he *is* the man. And the poetry of Mrs. Browning, like that of Swinburne, is to be read because it comes from the mind and heart of a complex, highly individualized personality endowed with the insight and the picturing power of a poet, not for any narrower reason. She was a great soul, and every lesser person who comes in contact with her spirit through what she has written will be uplifted and enlarged. No life, after a touch with hers, can ever be the same again, but will be something nobler and finer.

CHAPTER II

GOD AND THE WORLD

THE existence of a supreme First Cause and Creator seems never to have been a subject of controversy in the mind of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. She accepted the fact of God's existence simply, as she did that of any other personality with which she came in contact. She acknowledged the rights of the intellectual doubter, but she looked into the face of atheism with a mild wonder mingled with pity. During the early years of Elizabeth Barrett's literary life she carried on an industrious correspondence with Richard Hengist Horne, with whom she collaborated in certain literary ventures. In one of those precious and elaborate epistles to him she says: "You know Shelley, in the midst of the grand signatures of God, wrote at Chamouni $\ddot{\alpha}\theta\epsilonος$. Poor Shelley!—he lied against himself, as against the Creator." About the same time in "A Vision of Poets" she was writing of Lucretius, who "denied divinely the divine" and was compelled to "teach a truth he would not learn." In 1840, three days before the death of her beloved brother, she says: "There are so many mercies close around me that God's Being

seems proved to me, *demonstrated* to me, by His manifested love." And although the death of that brother, with the peculiarly distressing circumstances attending it, was a shock from which she never recovered, her faith in the goodness of God seems not to have wavered, as the poem "De Profundis" shows.

Again, some years later (1854), as she was trying to comfort a friend in sorrow, she says: "You know how that brilliant, witty, true poet Heine, who was an atheist (as much as a man can pretend to be), has made a public profession of a change of opinion which was pathetic to my mind and heart the other day as I read it." She continues: "He has joined no church, but simply (to use his own words) has 'returned home to God like the prodigal son after a long tending of the swine.' It is delightful to go home to God, even after a tending of the sheep." So, if a man calls himself an atheist, it was, she believed, a mere pretense. Despair was blasphemy.

By anguish which made pale the sun,
I heard Him charge his saints that none
Among his creatures anywhere
Blaspheme against Him with despair,
However darkly days go on.

The same thought recurs in "Aurora Leigh":

We blaspheme
At last, to finish our doxology,
Despairing on the earth for which He died.

She seems to have lived constantly in the presence of the thought of God. He was a “manifest God-One” to her. He was present in every touch, in every breathing. His goodness was immediate. “God’s goodness!—I believe in it, as in His sunshine here,” she cries in one of the early letters to Robert Browning. To her belief, God gave strength to support every act of life. He gave strength to sustain the blessings as well as the stripes; and without this belief she would not be content for a moment. The thought of the immediacy of God’s presence is to her prevailingly a thought of joy.

My spirit and my God shall be
My seaward hill, my boundless sea.

But now and then the child’s “Thou God seest me” is not a thought of unmixed joy. In a most natural impulse, she cries in “An Apprehension”: Let me not unfold myself, my “motive, condition, means, appliances, my false ideal joy and fickle woe,” even to the “gentlest-hearted friend I know.” And then, in a self-accusing revulsion of feeling, she exclaims,

O angels, let your flood
Of bitter scorn dash on me! do ye hear
What *I* say who bear calmly all the time
This everlasting face to face with God?

A vision of God! She sets it as a chrism upon Milton's eyes:

Here, Milton's eyes strike piercing-dim:
The shapes of suns and stars did swim
Like clouds from them, and granted him
God for sole vision;—

and, beyond all human longing, as the beatitude of the archangel, who, standing in the presence of the "satisfying One" and raising to God's face

his full ecstatic gazing,
Forgets the rush and rapture of his wings.

In fact, the name of Deity was so often present in her earlier manuscripts that one editor begs her to write the name of God and of Jesus Christ as little as she can because those names do not accord with the secular character of his journal! Moreover, this criticism—that she used the name of Deity too often—rang through review after review of the earlier works of the new woman poet in the years 1843–45. But it was a habit that could not be broken; and the letters show that it was the sincere expression of her type of mind. Scarcely one of them ends without a "God bless you" in the words of parting. "May God bless you till to-morrow and past it forever!" "May God bless you, give you the best blessing in earth and heaven as the God of the living in both

places!" "May God bless you for both His worlds—not for this alone"—these are some of her farewells. Above all, in the love letters of the two Brownings, those most sincere expressions of the innermost soul, where God is thanked in every breath for the ineffable joy of the moment, it could hardly happen otherwise than that the name of God should be written upon every page. Are these leaves too sacred to be touched by the strange hand? Yet they belong to the world now, and all may go there and read and know how near to the heart of God a human love at its highest may flow. At the end she says: "By to-morrow at this time, I shall have *you* only, to love me—my beloved!—*You* only! As if one said *God* only. And we shall have *Him* beside, I pray of *Him*." It is a comfort for her sake to know that the answers to these letters were full of the same worshipful spirit and contained many passages like this: "I hope and believe that by your side I shall accomplish something to justify God's goodness and yours," and like the words quoted in the opening chapter.

With this conception and feeling with regard to the being and nearness of God, it was natural that she should prize all sacred subjects as lawful material for artistic treatment in poetry. For doing this she was blamed by many of the critics of her

time. Can this be imagined to-day when the Bible is ransacked for themes for story, novel, and play? But Mrs. Browning said: "The Christian religion is true or it is not, and if it is true it offers the highest and purest objects of contemplation. And the poetical faculty, which expresses the highest moods of the mind, passes naturally to the highest objects. Who can separate these things? Did Dante? Did Tasso? Did Petrarch? Did Calderon? Did Chaucer? Did the poets of our best British days? Did anyone shrink from speaking out Divine names when the occasion came? Chaucer, with all his jubilee of spirit and resounding laughter, had the name of Jesus Christ and God as frequently to familiarity on his lips as a child has its father's name." Reading this, one understands her "Book of the Poets," an early work in prose which is not generally printed in her collected works but well repays the trouble of hunting out, and also that task so fitted to her hand, the "Greek Christian Poets," who received a treatment from her which was tender and sympathetic.

With one to whom the thought of God is an everyday presence, it might go without saying that the immortality of the soul would be a confirmed and vital belief. This belief Mrs. Browning states on many a page.

Love, strong as Death, shall conquer Death,
Through struggle made more glorious,

she cries in “A Child’s Grave at Florence.”
Again, in “Lord Walter’s Wife”:

Love’s a virtue for heroes!—as white as the snow on high hills,
And immortal as every great soul is that struggles, endures,
and fulfills.

And that men have chosen “till death us part”
for the symbol of the unchangeable human tie—

Oh words to be our best—for love the deathless!—

forces from her lips the poignant cry, “Be pitiful,
O God!” When writing to her friends she drops
so easily into thoughts of the life to come. “When
we two meet together in the new world”; “My
ever very dear friend: you never can be other than
just *that* while I live, and why not after I have
ceased to live?”—these are some of the phrases so
thickly strewn through the letters. “Isobel’s
Child,” an early poem, is a veritable mine of in-
formation as to the stage in religious belief that
the young poet had reached in the year 1838.
Isobel mourns the certain approach of her child’s
death; but the little one is imagined to give such
a description of the happiness before her in heaven
that the mother is comforted, and is satisfied to
let her child depart.

O small frail being, wilt thou stand
At God's right hand,
Lifting up those sleeping eyes
Dilated by great destinies,
To an endless waking? thrones and seraphim,
Through the long ranks of their solemnities,
Sunning thee with calm looks of Heaven's surprise,
But thine alone on Him?

And as the child lies upon her lap she looks down upon it and is filled with the assurance that the "broken sentiency and conclusion incomplete" that she feels in the little life

Will gather and unite and climb
To an immortality
Good or evil, each sublime,
Through life and death to life again.

The poet reproves herself for her discontent—the thought of our "hope beyond the zenith" should give us cheer; this Mrs. Browning teaches in "The Weakest Thing," in "Cheerfulness Taught by Reason," and, above all, in the sonnet "Futurity":

And, O belovèd voices, upon which
Ours passionately call because ere long
Ye brake off in the middle of that song
We sang together softly, to enrich
The poor world with the sense of love, and witch
The heart out of things evil,—I am strong,
Knowing ye are not lost for aye among
The hills, with last year's thrush. God keeps a niche
In Heaven to hold our idols; and albeit
He brake them to our faces and denied
That our close kisses should impair their white,

I know we shall behold them raised, complete,
The dust swept from their beauty,—glorified
New Memnons singing in the great God-light.

Who shall say how many have been comforted and strengthened by this triumphant poem! To Mrs. Browning everything proved that immortal life is to be the human destiny. Nothing

shall remove

Affections purely given;
And e'en that mortal grief shall prove
The immortality of love,
 And heighten it with Heaven.

The thought that mortal grief proves human love and human love proves the immortality of the soul was a favorite one with her, and it recurs again and again. It was one of her "strong opinions" even down to the day when in the last of her human letters she spoke of heaven as the "Diviner Country." She said: "I believe that love in its most human relations is an eternal thing." "Do not think that I think that *any bond will be broken*, or that anything will be lost. We have been fed on the hillside, and now there are twelve baskets full of fragments remaining." "How the spiritual world gets thronged to us with familiar faces till at last, perhaps, the world here will seem the vague and strange world, even while we remain."

To this sensitive poet, housed in a body of ex-

tremest delicacy, the fact of death had its terrors; but she could look beyond. "More and more life is what we want," she quoted from Tennyson in 1858, "and that is the right want. Indifference to life is a disease and therefore not strength. But the life here is only half the apple—a cut out of the apple, I should say, merely meant to suggest the perfect round of fruit." To her beloved friend, Mary Russell Mitford, she wrote: "I have long been convinced that what we call death is a mere incident in life—perhaps scarcely a greater one than . . . the revolution which comes with any new emotion or influx of new knowledge." The time did not matter to her—the main thing being something far more material. "Life will last as long as God finds it useful for myself and others—which is enough, both for them and me." "To live rightly we must turn our faces forward and press forward and not look backward morbidly for the footsteps in the dust of those beloved ones who traveled with us yesterday. They themselves are not behind us but before, and we carry with us our tenderness living and undiminished towards them, to be completed when the round of this life is complete for us also." "In our sorrow we see the rough side of the stuff; in our joys the smooth; and who shall say that when the taffeta is turned the most *silk* may not be in the sorrows?" Again,

using a like figure, and with a little touch of her lambent humor, she says: "If it were not for the *other side of the tapestry* it would seem not worth while for us to stand putting in more weary Gobelin stitches (till we turn into goblins) day after day, year after year, in this sad world." Yet from her many years of physical disability she could win this wisdom: "O be sure that He means well by us by what we suffer, and it is when we suffer that He often makes the meaning clearer." "If illness suppresses in us a few sources of pleasure, it leaves the real *Ich* open to influences and keen-sighted to *facts* which are as surely natural as the fly's wing, though we are apt to consider them vaguely as 'supernatural.'" And through this insight she came to believe "how mere a line this is to overstep between the living and the dead."

As to the resurrection, she says in one of her many revelatory letters: "I am heterodox about sepulchers, and believe that no part of us will ever lie in a grave. . . . I believe that the body of flesh is a mere husk that drops off at death, while the spiritual body (see St. Paul) emerges in a glorious resurrection at once. . . . I believe in an active *human* life, beyond death as before it, an uninterrupted human life. I believe in no waiting in the grave, and in no vague effluence of spirit in a formless vapor." Her thoughts constantly reach

out into the beyond, and minimize the bar of death at the gateway of the future.

This may be less so than appears,
This change and separation . . .

. . .
If God is not too great for little cares,
Is any creature, because gone to God?

The comfortable and salutary doctrine of guardian angels, so plainly taught in the Bible but so little regarded by the majority of evangelical teachers, seems to have been a very vivid thing to her. The baby-innocent of "Isobel's Child," pleading with its mother to cease that "most loving cruelty" of her prayer that kept the child-spirit from floating away "along the happy heavenly air," says for plaintive argument,

Mine angel looketh sorrowful
Upon the face of God.

And in the very climax of that rhapsody of sorrows, the "Cry of the Children," what pierces the heart deepest comes when the children

look up with their pale and sunken faces,
And their look is dread to see,
For they mind you of their angels in high places,
With eyes turned on Deity.

Our guardian angels are always seen by the poet with their eyes reproachfully fixed upon the face of God. They stand and pray for us. When

Mrs. Browning's loved friend, the blind Hugh Stuart Boyd, passed away she wrote:

God has not caught thee to new hemispheres
Because thou wast aweary of this one;—
I think thine angel's patience first was done,
And that he spake out with celestial tears,
“Is it enough, dear God? then lighten so
This soul that smiles in darkness!”

Again, in “The Seraphim,” the hosts of angels are waiting in awful silence, ready to come to the succor of Jesus Christ in his hour of agony. Zerah, the angel of love, stands to see them and cries to a companion spirit:

I see
Our empyreal company,
Alone the memory of their brightness
Left in them, as in thee.
The circle upon circle, tier on tier,
Piling earth's hemisphere
With heavenly infiniteness,
Above us and around,
Straining the whole horizon like a bow:
Their songful lips divorcèd from all sound,
A darkness gliding down their silver glances,—
Bowing their steadfast solemn countenances
As if they heard God speak, and could not glow.

How she loves to picture them—range on range, pyramid on pyramid, standing up in ecstasies against the hyaline! Now we see them from above as we stand with the two angels watching the seraphic flights who are commanded by God to

fly to the help of Christ in the dark hour of the
crucifixion!

Beneath us sinks the pomp angelical,
Cherub and seraph, powers and virtues, all,—

The roar of whose descent has died
To a still sound, as thunder into rain.

Immeasurable space spreads magnified

With that thick life, along the plane
The worlds slid out on. What a fall

And eddy of wings innumEROUS, crossed

By trailing curls that have not lost

The glitter of the God-smile shed

On every prostrate angel's head!

What gleaming up of hands that fling

Their homage in retorted rays,

From high instinct of worshiping,

And habitude of praise!

Zerah. Rapidly they drop below us:

Pointed palm and wing and hair

Indistinguishable show us

Only pulses in the air

Throbbing with a fiery beat,

As if a new creation heard

Some divine and plastic word,

And trembling at its new-found being,

Awakened at our feet.

Again, in “A Drama of Exile”:

The angelic hosts, the archangelic pomps,
Thrones, dominations, princedoms, rank on rank,
Rising sublimely to the feet of God,
On either side and overhead the gate,
Show like a glittering and sustained smoke
Drawn to an apex. That their faces shine
Betwixt the solemn clasping of their wings
Clasped high to a silver point above their heads,—
We only guess from hence, and not discern.

The mission of the guardian angel is lofty. On the day when Adam and Eve flew along the sword-glare, a company of Eden spirits—orphaned now that their charges were being thrust away from them—called after the exiles in chorus:

Hearken, oh hearken! ye shall hearken surely
For years and years,
The noise beside you, dripping coldly, purely,
Of spirits' tears.
The yearning to a beautiful denied you
Shall strain your powers;
Ideal sweetesses shall overglide you,
Resumed from ours.
In all your music, our pathetic minor
Your ears shall cross;
And all good gifts shall mind you of diviner,
With sense of loss.
We shall be near you in your poet-languors
And wild extremes,
What time ye vex the desert with vain angers,
Or mock with dreams.
And when upon you, weary after roaming,
Death's seal is put,
By the foregone ye shall discern the coming,
Through eyelids shut.

Guardian angels have, too, another office. Like those gods of George Meredith who “by their great memories are known,” Mrs. Browning’s guardian angels keep a record and will at some future time accuse. In her “Song for the Ragged Schools of London” she uses this thought to intensify her plea for those

Ragged children with bare feet,
Whom the angels in white raiment
Know the names of, to repeat
When they come on you for payment.

The fact of retribution she acknowledges frequently, but more as an argument before the act than as an accusation afterward. Yet Mrs. Browning would be the last one to want this phase of her thought to be slighted—she who, as she said, could “never regret knowledge, never would unknow anything, even were it the taste of the apples by the Dead Sea.” However, though she felt she must admit the conventional doctrine of eternal punishment for sin, she seems loath to speak of it, or it is rather, perhaps, unnatural for her gentle mind to dwell very much upon that phase of theological teaching. In later days she was steadier of eye and could at some times have stood up beside an imprecatory psalmist. But, beyond a conventional and semi-poetic allusion in one or two places, she makes little reference to the Evil One. To be sure, there is Lucifer in the “Drama of Exile”; he is to be thought of as a character in a work of the imagination; he belongs in a group of literary devils among whom Mrs. Browning in the “Book of the Poets” classed that “grand luxurious melancholy devil” of Marlowe, and “Goethe’s subtle biting Voltairish devil—each being devil after its kind.” We might mention in

this connection the aristocratic prince of lost spirits of the "Paradise Lost"; if Milton's Satan is the Byron of literary devils, Mrs. Browning's Lucifer is the Shelley in that company. This is the way Lucifer is introduced to us. Gabriel says to him:

"Angel of the sin,
Such as thou standest,—pale in the drear light
Which rounds the rebel's work with Maker's wrath,—
Thou shalt be an Idea to all souls,
A monumental melancholy gloom
Seen down all ages, whence to mark despair
And measure out the distances from good."

Lucifer's meanness repels us at first, and on the wavering line between scorn and pity we balance delicately; but there is a white heat sweeping down the lines where he hurls his last curse after the departing Adam and Eve, that gives a picture of the veritable meaning of hell unequaled in literature. Lucifer, now

The outcast and the mildew of things good,
The leper of angels,

looks back to the angel that he was, created good and fair, and then begs Adam and Eve to rejoice because they do not know a "fire-hate" such as harbors in his breast, a "potential hate"

Wherein I, angel, in antagonism
To God and his reflex beatitudes,
Moan ever, in the central universe,
With the great woe of striving against Love
And gasp for space amid the Infinite,
And toss for rest amid the Desertness,

Self-orphaned by my will, and self-elect
To kingship of resistant agony
Toward the Good around me—hating good and love,
And willing to hate good and to hate love,
And willing to will on so evermore,
Scorning the past and damning the to-come—
 Go and rejoice! I curse you.

And when the last “ah, ah, Heosphoros” has faded down the mists, and all the “piteous pomp at morn and even and melancholy leaning out of heaven” have passed, we have no compunctions visitings as we go to join the company of poor Rabbie Burns and are “wae to think upo’ yon den e’en for his sake.”

When she comes to consider the future estate of the eternally lost her loving nature will hardly let her name the name. Again a quotation from “Isobel’s Child” must be taken. The mother holds upon her lap the child whom she supposes to be asleep, and reflects upon the possibility that its soul may “self-willed” go

to tread the Godless place,
(God keep thy will!) feel thine energies
Cold, strong, objectless, like a dead man’s clasp,
The sleepless, deathless life within thee grasp,—
While myriad faces, like one changeless face,
With woe *not love’s*, shall glass thee everywhere
And overcome thee with thine own despair.

“Woe not love’s”! It was as far as her gentle touch could go.

Yet she fully believed in the doctrine of original

sin, as many passages in the earlier poems show, and down to the latest she at any rate did not overcome the habit of reflecting upon the trail of Adamic influence upon the race. Pardon is asked for the “woe mine Adam sent” in “The Poet’s Vow”; and again, referring to Isobel’s child, the mother says:

A solemn thing it is to me
To look upon a babe that sleeps
Wearing in its spirit-deeps
The undeveloped mystery
Of our Adam’s taint and woe,
Which, when they developed be,
Will not let it slumber so.

In “Earth and Her Praisers” she speaks of the “ancient curse” upon earth; one of the greatest sections of the “Drama of Exile” is based upon the same idea, and in “The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus” she makes this use of the doctrine. Mary says:

So, seeing my corruption, can I see
This Incorruptible now born of me,
This fair new Innocence no sun did chance
To shine on, (for even Adam was no child,)
Created from my nature all defiled,
This mystery, from out mine ignorance,—
Nor feel the blindness, stain corruption more
Than others do, or *I* did heretofore?
Can hands wherein such burden pure has been,
Not open with the cry “unclean, unclean,”
More oft than any else beneath the skies?
Ah King, ah Christ, ah Son!
The kine, the shepherds, the abasèd wise
Must all less lowly wait
Than I, upon thy state.

And yet she believed in the divinity that harbors
in every human being.

God's image cannot shine
Where sin's funereal darkness lowers.

The sting of death is sin; the “griefs that are incurable are those that have our own sins festering in them”; yet,

O thou that sinnest, grace doth more abound
Than all thy sin! sit still beneath My rood,
And count the droppings of My victim-blood,
And seek none other sound!

She reaches the biblical and philosophical instruction upon repentance; honors to the mighty dead are

best supplied

By bringing actions to prove theirs not vain.

Yet she came to think that, however marred, we cannot do without our past. In the first part of “Casa Guidi Windows,” written in 1848, we find a wonderful passage that shows a step in advance. There’s room, she says in effect, for the weakest man alive to live and die, and for the strong to live well, too; then let the living live, and the dead “retain their grave-cold flowers.” After a moment she picks up the thought and weaves it over into something better still:

Cold graves, we say? it shall be testified
That living men who burn in heart and brain,
Without the dead were colder. If we tried
To sink the past beneath our feet, be sure
The future would not stand.

This thought she turns over in the light of several illuminating figures, and then continues:

Who dared build temples, without tombs in sight?
Or live, without some dead man's benison?
Or seek truth, hope for good, and strive for right,
If, looking up, he saw not in the sun
Some angel of the martyrs all day long
Standing and waiting? . . .
. . .
If orphaned, we are disinherited.

As she proceeds to greater maturity she takes into her thought the

poor blind souls
That writhe toward heaven along the devil's trail.

"Tis written in the Book
He heareth the young ravens when they cry,
And yet they cry for carrion.—O my God,
And we, who make excuses for the rest,
We do it in our measure. Then I knelt,
And dropped my head upon the pavement too,
And prayed, since I was foolish in desire
Like other creatures, craving offal-food,
That He would stop his ears to what I said,
And only listen to the run and beat
Of this poor, passionate, helpless blood—

And then
I lay, and spoke not: but He heard in heaven.

Mrs. Browning does not say much about prayer—it is not necessary, for a large part of the poems by her are prayer itself. Still, now and then an academic touch in the letters gives a hint that she has allowed her mind to dwell upon the abstract

questions that hedge about the self-conscious intellectual problems of prayer. Fanaticism, she says, depends on the defect of intellect rather than on an excess of the adoring faculty. The latter cannot be too fully developed.

"Sleep late," I said?—

Why, now, indeed, they sleep.

God answers sharp and sudden on some prayers,
And thrusts the thing we have prayed for in our face,
A gauntlet with a gift in't. Every wish
Is like a prayer, with God.

Was prayer a mystery to her? She referred it to the request of God—together with other mysteries she despaired of fathoming. "God's will" is the only answer to the mystery of the world's afflictions, she said; and in another place she enlarges the circle of this thought a little more: "God's wisdom, deeply steeped in His love, *is* as far as we can stretch out our hands." She talks glibly of the "portion of earthly happiness not irremediably lost to me by the Divine decree," as if the divine decree had no terrors for her. In "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" she touches the doctrine of predestination, and in "The Seraphim" the second angel refuses to let the first angel approach because it is "not willed" that he should do so. In another breath she is letting Christ answer to the Spirits of the Earth who (in the "Drama of Exile") have been scoffing at Adam and Eve,

Which of you disdains
These sinners who in falling proved their height
Above you by their liberty to fall?

And it must be admitted that she has very good example in putting the two aspects of truth side by side! As she would herself have said at this point, see Saint Paul! Yet she says: "I don't call myself a Calvinist. I hang suspended between the two doctrines, and hide my eyes in God's love from the sights that other people *say* they see. I believe simply that the saved are saved by grace, and that they shall hereafter know it fully; and that the lost are lost by their choice and free will —by choosing to sin and die; and I believe absolutely that the deepest damned of all the lost will not dare to whisper to the nearest devil that reproach of Martha, 'If the Lord had been near me, I had not died.' But of the means of the working of God's grace, and of the time of the formation of the Divine counsels, I know nothing, guess nothing, and struggle to guess nothing; and my persuasion is that when people talk of what was ordained or approved by God before the foundation of the world, their tendency is almost always toward a confusion of His eternal nature with the human conditions of ours; and to an oblivion of the fact that with Him there can be no after nor before." The pages of discussion of Paul's meaning in Rom.

8. 29, which follow this quotation from a letter to the Greek scholar Hugh Stuart Boyd, would be interesting to theologians. But the spirit in which she took refuge from the mazes of argument is shown in the following stanzas from "De Profundis," that very rapture of renunciation to God's will:

For us,—whatever's undergone,
Thou knowest, wildest what is done.
Grief may be joy misunderstood;
Only the Good discerns the good.
I trust Thee while my days go on.

Whatever's lost, it first was won;
We will not struggle nor impugn.
Perhaps the cup was broken here,
That Heaven's new wine might show more clear.
I praise Thee while my days go on.

I praise Thee while my days go on;
I love Thee while my days go on;
Through dark and dearth, through fire and frost,
With emptied arms and treasure lost,
I thank Thee while my days go on:

On the whole, the view of life that Mrs. Browning entertains is an optimistic one:

Our only tears shall serve to prove
Excess in pleasure or in love;

and we are made to find this true when we refer all things to heavenly standards.

What's the best thing in the world?

• • • • •
—Something out of it, I think.

The “Rhapsody of Life’s Progress” is a very pæan of triumph over all possible forms of anguish and trouble:

I am strong in the spirit,—deep-thoughted, clear-eyed,—
I could walk, step for step, with an angel beside,
On the heaven-heights of truth.

• • • • •
On, chariot! on, soul!
Ye are all the more fleet—
Be alone at the goal
Of the strange and the sweet!

Love us, God! love us, man! we believe, we achieve:
Let us love, let us live,
For the acts correspond:
We are glorious, and DIE:
And again on the knee of a mild Mystery
That smiles with a change,
Here we lie.
O DEATH, O BEYOND,
Thou art sweet, thou art strange

Very much the same thoughts are expressed in a letter to Robert Browning: “You are not to think —whatever I may have written or implied—that I lean either to the philosophy or affectation which beholds the world through darkness instead of light, and speaks of it wailingly. Now, may God forbid that it should be so with me. I am not desponding by nature, and after a course of bitter mental discipline and long bodily seclusion I come out with two learnt lessons . . . —the wisdom of cheerfulness and the duty of social intercourse. Anguish has instructed me in joy and solitude in

society. . . . And altogether, I may say that the earth looks the brighter to me in proportion to my own deprivations. The laburnum trees and rose trees are plucked up by the roots—but the sunshine is in their places, and the root of the sunshine is above the storms. What we call Life is a condition of the soul, and the soul must improve in happiness and in wisdom, except by its own fault. These tears in our eyes, these faintings of the flesh, will not hinder such improvement."

Another rhapsody of life's progress—although not under that name—may be read at the closing of the last book of "Aurora Leigh." The keynote is, "He shall make all new." But, until the time when these radiant prophecies may be fulfilled, we must fit the things of earth to the standards of heaven as well as we may. We get knowledge by losing what we hoped for, and liberty by losing what we loved. "This world is a fragment—or, rather, a segment—and it will be rounded presently, to the completer satisfaction. Not to doubt *that* is the greatest blessing it gives now. Death is as vain as life; the common impression of it, as false and absurd. A mere change of circumstances. What more? And how near those spirits are, how conscious, how full of active energy and tender reminiscence and interest, who shall dare to doubt? For myself, I do not doubt at all."

CHAPTER III

THE REALMS OF MYSTICISM

"I AM," said Mrs. Browning, in a beautiful letter written to Ruskin in 1859, "what many people call a 'mystic,' but what I myself call a 'realist,' because I consider that every step of the foot or stroke of the pen here has some real connection with and result in the hereafter"—which shows that whatever else she was there was no touch of the doctrinaire in her. She uses words to suit herself—poetically and not technically. But it does not prove that she had not thought the theorems of theology through to the last issue, shirking nothing. She enters into discussion with her friend the blind Greek scholar Hugh Stuart Boyd; she goes through the Greek of the Epistle to the Romans to trace out the meanings of *προγιγνώσκειν*¹ (though she may not have noticed the accents!) and she takes a decided position for herself in the stormy controversy about "foreknow" and "publicly favor." She attended Bible meetings where, as we are given to understand, discussion raged, and she was the subject of much missionary en-

¹In Rom. 8. 29.

deavor on the part of ardent believers in this or that delicate shade of theological statement. Through all she showed a thoroughly sweet but unbending intellectual independence and a loyalty to her own mind which was ever the absolute necessity to her soul's peace.

Mrs. Browning was inclined toward a mystical conception because she had so intense a feeling of God's presence about her.

Oh, the little birds sang east, and the little birds sang west—
· · · · ·

And I smiled to think God's greatness flowed around our incompleteness,—

Round our restlessness, His rest.

But it was far more than a mere sense of rest that she felt in relying on the infinite power of God. It was something more real, more tangible, more personal. It must be that she had this clear realization of the Being of God from her earliest days. Her memories of childhood thoughts and experiences found here and there throughout her works seem to show her belief that the young soul, the new, uninitiated soul, has avenues connecting it with divine realms that in later years worldliness may clog or sin may seal. The passage in "Aurora Leigh" where Aurora recalls the playmates of her childhood, the Italian lizards, among whom she "sat equally in fellowship and mateship," as a

child may, "before the Adam in him has foregone all privilege of Eden," illustrates this. Before "the Adam" in us, then, has lost all sense of Eden we may know the presence of God in close nearness to us on every side. There is a sense of God in the mind of every child, she thought, as Wordsworth, in the great "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Childhood," has shown that he also believed. And that the instinctive aspiration of the child's mind should not be met with silence and vacancy in the mind of the teacher, she declares with a vehemence and a penetration wanting in the educationalists of her time. When Marian Erle is relating the pathetic tale of her life, she tells how at three she, a "poor weaned kid," would

run off from the fold,
This babe would steal off from the mother's chair,
And, creeping through the golden walls of gorse,
Would find some keyhole toward the secrecy
Of Heaven's high blue, and, nestling down, peer out—
Oh, not to catch the angels at their games,—
She had never heard of angels,—but to gaze
She knew not why, to see she knew not what,
A-hungering outward from the barren earth
For something like a joy. She liked, she said,
To dazzle black her sight against the sky,
For then, it seemed, some grand blind Love came down,
And groped her out, and clasped her with a kiss;
She learnt God that way. . . .

This grand blind Love, she said,
This skyey father and mother both in one,
Instructed her and civilized her more
Than even Sunday school did afterward,
To which a lady sent her to learn books
And sit upon a long bench in a row
With other children.

But her keen sense of the nearness of the spiritual world was more than a memory of childhood to Mrs. Browning. Like the young Rossetti and others of the Preraphaelite Brotherhood, her mind was of the eager, questioning order, given to finding symbolisms in everything in human life and in the universe; the kind of mind that looked through every symbol to a meaning beyond and to which every symbol was as a telescope to bring spiritual meanings within reach of human ken. An Oriental legend with all its soft sensuousness, when her hand touches it, is illumined with spiritual symbolism. There is no mistaking the Dove in "Isobel's Child"—whose

love-large eye
Looked upon me mystic calms,
Till the power of his divine
Vision was indrawn to mine.

When she looked within her own soul she felt the strange movement of forces that she could only explain by relating them to the supernatural. "You have divine insights," she said to one correspondent, "as we all have, of heaven, all of us

with whom the mortal mind does not cake and obstruct into cecity.” And it was one of her wonderfully illuminating strokes of analysis when she said, in “Aurora Leigh,”

How sure it is,
That, if we say a true word, instantly
We feel 'tis God's, not ours, and pass it on
Like bread at sacrament we taste and pass
Nor handle for a moment, as indeed
We dared to set up any claim to such!

In “The Seraphim” the loving angel Zerah says,

His will is as a spirit within my spirit,
A portion of the being I inherit.
His will is mine obedience.

The thought of the mystic union of God and the believer in Christ finds expression in one of those almost ecstatic Hymns in the volume of 1838. It is Hymn 1, and is called “A Supplication for Love”; the last stanza begins with the prayerful lines,

Oh, move us—Thou hast power to move—
One in the one Beloved to be!—

and was no doubt an expression of her own personal feeling, for it harbors that passionate desire to “right” her “nature” in deep calms of space, then “shoot large sail on lengthening cord, and rush exultant on the Infinite,” which finds expression again in a lovely sonnet called “Finite and Infinite.” In these dim feelings she is often ver-

ging upon a mystical conception of the universe. In the poem called "Sounds" we find this:

Hearken, hearken!
God speaketh to thy soul,
Using the supreme voice which doth confound
All life with consciousness of Deity,
 All senses into one,—
As the seer-saint of Patmos, loving John
 (For whom did backward roll
The cloud-gate of the future), turned to *see*
The Voice which spake. It speaketh now,
Through the regular breath of the calm creation,
Through the moan of the creature's desolation
Striking, and in its stroke resembling
The memory of a solemn vow
Which pierceth the din of a festival
To one in the midst,—and he letteth fall
 The cup with a sudden trembling.

As she sees it in "A Rhapsody of Life's Progress," we are moving along the "inward ascensions" of our "sensual relations and social conventions,"

Yet are 'ware of a sight, yet are 'ware of a sound
 Beyond Hearing and Seeing,—
Are aware that a Hades rolls deep on all sides
 With its infinite tides
About and above us,—

the word "Hades" being here evidently used in the classic meaning of a dim underworld of spirits, but exalted in her thought to an all-inclosing over-world of spiritual essence which, if we were but attuned harmoniously, we could by reaching out in any direction, touch to its finer issues and enjoy,

until the strong arch
Of our life creaks and bends as if ready for falling,
And through the dim rolling we hear the sweet calling
Of spirits that speak in a soft undertongue
The sense of the mystical march:—

this thought the poet touches timidly, with a sort of tremulous joy. Then she calls into that world of spiritual effluence and asks the angels to come nearer, to speak clearer, and teach her the song that they sing. But whether they answer or not she will smile in her thoughts,

For to dream of a sweetness is sweet as to know.

In “Human Life’s Mystery” she touches the lowest degree in a discouraged mood; while in “A Child’s Thought of God” lies the answer—the only one there is—“I feel that His embrace slides down by thrills through all things made.”

And, in the tumult and excess
 Of act and passion under sun,
We sometimes hear—oh, soft and far,
 As silver star did touch with star,
The kiss of Peace and Righteousness
 Through all things that are done.

God keeps his holy mysteries
 Just on the outside of man’s dream;
In diapason slow, we think
 To hear their pinions rise and sink,
While they float pure beneath his eyes,
 Like swans adown a stream.

Abstractions, are they, from the forms
 Of his great beauty?—exaltations
From his great glory?—strong previsions
 Of what we shall be?—intuitions
 Of what we are—in calms and storms
 Beyond our peace and passions?

Things nameless! which, in passing so,
 Do stroke us with a subtle grace;
We say, “Who passes?”—they are dumb;
 We cannot see them go or come,
 Their touches fall soft, cold, as snow
 Upon a blind man’s face.

Yet, touching so, they draw above
 Our common thoughts to Heaven’s unknown;
Our daily joy and pain advance
 To a divine significance
 Our human love—O mortal love,
 That light is not its own!

Her all-abandoning resignation to the will of God did not keep her from a passionate outreach-ing of the mind to know more of the working of God’s creative energy in the universe, especially in the borderlands that were then spreading and widening in every direction. It must be remem-bered how many of these boundaries, then shroud-ed in the mists of ignorance and therefore of dis-trust, have since been to some extent charted. Mrs. Browning was possessed of the same divine curiosi-ty that has led so many explorers into those dangerous regions, characterized in the minds of the pious folk of that time as full of the quick-

sands of ill fame and fluttered over with the ignis fatuus of insincerity. Yet scientific men have braved these limbos, and so rescued the exploring bands from the sting of disrepute. They have also rid the new countries of much of the charlatanry that had at once crowded into the ranks; and her name with theirs must have honor for the spirit in which she thought and spoke—perhaps we may not say studied, for the investigations can hardly have reached the stage of systematic study in the day of the early experiences of Elizabeth Barrett.

These alluring borderlands had several distinct regions. There was mesmerism with attendant phrenology, crystal ball prophesying, and clairvoyance paid and unpaid; there was Swedenborgianism with many long books for her to read alongside of her Balzac and Sacchetti; and there was spiritualism.

In the early days of the excitement about mesmerism (that is, about 1845) she took the greatest interest in the discussions. She first knew of its use in connection with the sickness of her friend Miss Harriet Martineau. Not only was Miss Martineau herself cured by means of mesmeric trances, but also she had an “apocalyptic house-maid (save the mark!)”, as Mrs. Browning says, who, being *clairvoyante*, prophesied concerning the anatomical structure of herself and others, and

declared "awful spiritual dicta" concerning the soul and the mind and their destination. Miss Barrett came to believe in this mysterious force as an agency, but she refused to permit its use in her own case. In a letter to Mr. Horne she said: "I am credulous and superstitious, naturally, and find no difficulty in the *wonder*; only precisely because I believe it, I would not subject myself to this mystery at the will of another, and this induction into things unseen. . . . Is it lawful—or, if lawful, expedient? Do you believe a word of it, or are you skeptical?" With another friend, Mrs. Jameson, she viewed it with horror. If there was anything in it, they said to each other, there was *so much* that it became scarcely possible to limit consequences, and the subject grew awful to contemplate. To this friend she wrote: "And now I do not like to send you this letter without telling you my impression about mesmerism, lest I seem reserved and 'afraid of committing myself,' as prudent people are. I will confess, then, that my *impression* is in favor of the reality of mesmerism to some unknown extent. I particularly dislike believing it, I would rather believe most other things in the world; but the evidence of the 'cloud of witnesses' does thunder and lightning so in my ears and eyes, that I believe, while my blood runs cold. I would not be practiced upon—no, not for

one of Flushie's¹ ears, and I hate the whole theory. It is hideous to my imagination, especially what is called phrenological mesmerism. After all, truth is to be accepted; and testimony, when so various and decisive, is an ascertainer of truth." To another literary friend she wrote: "I do lean to believing this *class* of mysteries, and I see nothing more incredible in the marvels of clairvoyance than in that singular adaptation of another person's senses which is a common phenomenon of the simple forms of mesmerism. If it is credible that a person in a mesmeric sleep can taste the sourness of the vinegar on another person's palate, I am ready to go the whole length of the transmigration of senses." And yet, she said, it made her blood run backward, and she would not allow her sister to send a lock of her hair to a Parisian prophet to get an oracle therefrom concerning the fate in store for her! No! If she had yielded she would have felt the steps of pale spirits treading thick as snow all over her sofa and bed, and pulling a corresponding lock of hair on her head at awful intervals!

A characteristic touch of mysticism comes out in another letter to the same friend. Is one not, she asks, to hold an opinion as a thinking being the grounds of which one cannot as yet justify to

¹"Flush" is the name of the famous dog given to Elizabeth Barrett by Mary Russell Mitford.

the world? Have we not opinions beyond what we can prove to others? And because some of the links of the outer chain of logical argument fail, are we therefore to have our honors questioned because we do not yield what is suspended to an inner uninjured chain of at once subtler and stronger formation? To make a moral obligation of an intellectual act, is not this the first step and gesture in all persecution for opinion?

But however much she may have thought upon this subject, and however eagerly she may have desired certain knowledge, it seems not to have invaded the realm where the spirits of song reside. Mr. Browning used the themes suggested by mesmerism almost voluminously, but Mrs. Browning not definitely once.

To the voluminous literature of Swedenborgianism she brought the same detached, judicial frame of mind. Long before she knew the name of Swedenborg, she had thought out for herself some of the same ideas that he stated; as, for example, that some persons do not, immediately after death, realize that they have passed into a superearthly state; and when accused of a Swedenborgian tendency in her writings, she affirms earnestly and repeatedly that she has written most of her poems before she had read any of that mystic's writings. But the writings interested her. In 1853

she speaks of "making frocks for her child, reading Proudhon (and Swedenborg) and in deep meditation on the rapping spirits." In 1859 she has difficulty in getting books (she is in Rome); she gets what she can, and "stops up the chinks with Swedenborg." Again she said, in 1861: "I don't believe in any such thing as arbitrary rewards and punishments, but in consequences and logical results. That seems to me God's way of working. The scriptural phrases are simply symbolical and Swedenborg helps you past the symbol."

Again in a letter to Ruskin she says: "I believe in a perpetual sequence (in rewards and punishments) and a correspondence between the natural world and the spiritual." This is perhaps more like a transference of Swedenborgian thought than anything else to be found in her writings, but there are many similar expressions to be found in her earliest works. It may be that some reflection of these thoughts will be found in the following passage in Book V of "*Aurora Leigh*," a poem finished in 1856:

There's not a flower of spring
That dies ere June but vaunts itself allied
By issue and symbol, by significance
And correspondence, to that spirit-world
Outside the limits of our space and time,
Whereto we are bound.

Or in this from Book VIII:

And verily many thinkers of this age,
Ay, many Christian teachers, half in heaven,
Are wrong in just my sense who understood
Our natural world too insularly, as if
No spiritual counterpart completed it,
Consummating its meaning, rounding all
To justice and perfection, line by line,
Form by form, nothing single nor alone,
The great below clenched by the great above,
Shade here authenticating substance there,
The body proving spirit, as the effect
The cause: we meantime being too grossly apt
To hold the natural, as dogs a bone
(Though reason and nature beat us in the face),
So obstinately that we'll break our teeth
Or ever we let go.

Perhaps the impressions made upon her by those forerunners of a spiritistic movement, mesmerism, Swedenborgianism, and kindred isms that forced themselves upon her attention, prepared her mind to give more serious thought to the often undignified phenomena of spirit-rapping than she would have given without those predisposing influences. Always following with most earnest gaze "the loosening of the soul to the end of its tether while it runs into the spiritual world and returns again to this," there was yet in her a power of skepticism which sometimes "grew through Hume's process of doubtful doubts," as she said, "and at last rose to the full stature of incredulity." This attitude of question and balance in intellectual

matters was with her from first to last in her relations with people who were interested in the spiritistic investigations. It was a wonderful combination—that intense eagerness like a white flame, that implacable loyalty to the soul's belief of the moment at the stage of progress attained, that passion of poet and seer, that intelligent self-restraint that held all in control and waited—it is a picture of a soul's drama that has perhaps never been so laid bare to us as it has here.

In 1852 the word “hypnotism” had not been echoed and reechoed around the world as it has since, but the wonder-working crystal ball had been bought from an Egyptian magician and had been imported into the English drawing-room. Mrs. Browning, visiting in England, went to “meet it and the seer” and, she said, endured both luncheon and spiritual phenomena with great equanimity. It was, she thought, very curious as a sign of the times; but “I love the marvelous,” she added, as some sort of apology for her fanciful interest in the subject. Afterward she complained whimsically of the skepticism of certain leading people, among others of Charles Dickens: “Dickens, too, so fond of ghost stories as long as they are impossible!” On her return to Florence she writes to Mrs. Jameson: “We have been meditating socialism and mysticism of various kinds, deep in

Louis Blanc and Proudhon, deeper in the German spiritualists, added to which, I have by no means given up my French novels and my rapping spirits, of whom our American guests bring us relays of witnesses." There are, she hears, a matter of fifteen thousand mediums in America; and soon after, the American rapping spirits are imported to "great satisfaction." Now all Italy, all Europe are swept by the strange new doctrine, or rather frenzy. In Florence all classes of people are interested; tipping tables are everywhere; from the priest to the Mazzinian, people are making circles; from the Legation to the English chemists, they are serving tables (in spite of the Apostle) everywhere. An engraving of a spinning table at a shop window bears this motto of Galileo: "E pur si muove!" On the terrace at Bellosguardo the Brownings sat with a group of friends; they ate strawberries and cream and talked spiritualism until the fireflies came and Florence was dissolved away into the purple of the hills. "Profane or not," said Mrs. Browning, "I am resolved on getting as near to a solution of the spirit question as I can, and I don't believe in the least risk of profanity, seeing that whatever is, must be permitted; and that the contemplation of whatever is must be permitted also, where the intentions are pure and reverent. I can discern no more danger in psy-

chology than in mineralogy, only intensely a greater interest. As to the spirits, I care less about what they are capable of communicating than of the fact of their being communications. I certainly wouldn't set about building a system of theology out of their oracles. God forbid!" Four years later she shows the same balanced restraint. "I could never consent to receive my theology—or any species of guidance, in fact—from the 'spirits,' so called. I have no more confidence, apart from my own conscience and discretionary selection, in spirits out of the body, than in those embodied. The submission of the whole mind and judgment carries you in either case to the pope—or to the devil."

But she did believe that the widespread manifestations showed that the world was on the verge of great developments of our spiritual nature, on the verge of discovering a new law—or a new development of law. "As to the supernatural," she wrote, "if you mean by that the miraculous, the suspension of natural law, I certainly believe in it no more than you do. What happens, happens according to a natural law, the development of which only becomes fuller and more observable." It was this thought and this belief that lent her stability and peace in spite of the eager and wistful outreaching of her soul in every direction for

news of the spirit world. Fair investigation was all her desire. In a spirited letter to an opposer she cried: "You would have us snowed upon with poppies till we sleep and forget these things. I, on the contrary, would have our eyes wide open, our senses all attentive, our souls lifted in reverential expectation. Every *fact* is a word of God, and I call it irreligious to say, 'I will deny this because it displeases me,' 'I will look away from that because it will do me harm.' Why be afraid of the *truth*? God is in the truth and He is called also Love." She held every fact to be a footstep of Deity; we should pick up every rough, ungainly stone of a fact even though it were likely to tear the smooth wallet of theory. To the objection that the messages received were inconsequent and undignified, she was ready with characteristic answer. "Why are our communications chiefly trivial? Why, but because we ourselves are trivial, and don't bring serious souls and concentrated attentions and holy aspirations to the spirits who are waiting for these things? . . . We try experiments from curiosity, just as children play with the loadstone; our ducks swim, but they don't get beyond that, and *won't*, unless we do better."

The problem "whether the intelligence is external or whether it may not be an unconscious projection in the medium of a second personality

accompanied by clairvoyance and attended by physical manifestations," was a knotty question to her, as it remains to all students of the supernatural to this day. In spite of this and other unanswered questions, it seems that she did by the year 1858 reach a place where she could in a moment of triumphant faith make a declaration like this: "There is in the world now, I can testify to you, *scientific proof* that what we call death is a mere change of circumstances, a change of dress, a mere breaking of the outside shell and husk. . . . In twenty years the probability is that you will have no more doubters of the immortality of souls, and no more need of Platos to prove it." That this was the vision of the poet rather than the certainty of the reasoner, we need not say. Her faith based upon revealed religion made her leap quickly over to a belief based on a scientific proof which had not as yet been set on sure foundations. She did not think that it would be, *could* be, so long before all the problems would be solved. That this did not immediately come about was, of course, a source of the most poignant disappointment to her. In a letter to a friend she said: "Some of us have sat hour after hour in solitudes and silences God has made for us, listening to the inner life, questioning the depths and heights; yet the table did not tremble and tilt, and we had no

involuntary answers from the deeps of the soul, in raps or mystical sighs or bell-like sounds against the window." Again, in one of her latest letters, she says sadly: "The teachings of spiritualism are like those in the world. There are excellent things taught, and iniquitous things taught. Only the sublime communications are, as far as I know, decidedly absent." About the same time she speaks again more fully; and this was in the very winter before that "incident of death" occurred in the midst of her own immortal life. She was writing from Rome to Miss Haworth in January, 1861, and says: "As far as I am concerned I never heard or read a single communication which impressed me in the least: what does impress me is the probability of their being communications at all. . . . What are these intelligencies, separated yet related and communicating? What is their state? what their aspiration? have we had part or shall we have part with them? is this the corollary of man's life on earth? or are they unconscious echoes of his embodied soul? That anyone should admit a fact (such as a man being lifted into the air, for instance) and not be interested in it, is so foreign to the habits of my mind (which can't insulate a fact from an inference, and rest there) that I have not a word to say. Only I *see* that if this class of facts, however grotesque, be recog-

nized among thinkers, our reigning philosophy will modify itself; scientific men will conceive differently from Humboldt (for instance) of the mystery of life; the materialism which stifles the higher instincts of men will be dislodged.” She continues ardently: “*No truth can be dangerous.* What if Jesus Christ be taken for a medium, do you say? Well, what then? As perfect man, He possessed, I conclude, the full complement of a man’s faculties. But if He walked the sea as a medium, if virtue went out of Him as a mesmerizer, He also spoke the words which never man spake, was born for us, and died for us, and rose from the dead as the Lord God our Saviour. But the whole theory of spiritualism, all the phenomena, are strikingly *confirmatory* of revelation; nothing strikes me more than that. Hume’s argument against miracles (a strong argument) disappears before it, and Strauss’s conclusions from *a priori* assertion of impossibility fall to pieces at once.”

In the midst of this drama of spiritual experience she was writing her “Aurora Leigh.” How keenly she felt the disappointment of her hopes in the immediate flow of conclusive proof from masses of dim and wavering data, we learn in that wild onslaught of hers on the materialism of the age found in the confessions of Romney Leigh in the eighth Book of the poem. There she showed how

the futility of the spiritistic search had galled and stunned her. The best that she could make her Romney do was to find that our speculations are little more than

filling up with clay

The wards of this great key, the natural world
And fumbling vainly therefore at the lock
Of the spiritual,

until

we feel ourselves shut in
With all the wild-beast roar of struggling life,
The terrors and compunctions of our souls,
As saints with lions.

This was what it was to her after all—a “vain fumbling at the lock of the spiritual”; and this was how she felt—as a soul among lions, the wild-beast roar of struggling life about her.

Later she writes in a somewhat calmer mood. Aurora sits and meditates upon her loneliness as she remembers her Italian home and her father and mother who have passed into the eternal sleep, and she says:

And yet this may be less so than appears,
This change and separation. Sparrows five
For just two farthings, and God cares for each.
If God is not too great for little cares,
Is any creature, because gone to God?
I've seen some men, veracious, nowise mad,
Who have thought or dreamed, declared and testified
They heard the Dead a-ticking like a clock
Which strikes the hours of the eternities,
Beside them, with their natural ears,—and known
That human spirits feel the human way

And hate the unreasoning awe that waves them off
From possible communion. It may be.

“It may be”! And this was as far as all the years of thought and research in the realm of spiritistic investigation could lead her. This was all to which she was willing to give the seal of art from her known hand to the world.

CHAPTER IV

THE CHRIST

MRS. BROWNING's view of Jesus Christ was a personal and immediate one. Every event in his life was realized vividly to her poetic vision, and was held precious and native as of the things that she had actually seen and that were circled about a near and beloved friend. She cherished through life a strong desire to go to Jerusalem, but from fulfilling this wish she was in earlier life deterred by her ill health, and later by straightened means. But it was almost as if she had been there and had seen the very footsteps of Jesus upon the soil of Palestine, so permeated does her poetry seem to be, not only with his spirit but with his life, his every act and movement. As a babe she pictures him in the Virgin's arms while the pure mother looks down upon him musing, wondering:

Awful is this watching place,
Awful what I see from hence—
A king, without regalia,
A God, without the thunder,
A child, without the heart for play;
Ay, a Creator, rent asunder
From his first glory and cast away
On his own world, for me alone
To hold in hands created, crying—Son!

The mother of Jesus had a large place in the thought of this woman poet. Her translation of some stanzas of the Stabat Mater has a woman-like and very tender strain.

Mother full of lamentation,
Near that cross she wept her passion,
 Whereon hung her child and Lord.
Through her spirit worn and wailing,
Tortured by the stroke and failing,
 Passed and pierced the prophet's sword.

Oh, sad, sore, above all other,
Was that ever-blessed mother
 Of the sole-begotten One;
She who mourned and moaned and trembled
While she measured, nor dissembled,
 Such despairs of such a Son!

Where's the man could hold from weeping,
If Christ's mother he saw keeping
 Watch with mother-heart undone?
Who could hold from grief, to view her,
Tender mother true and pure,
 Agonizing with her Son?

For her people's sins she saw Him
Down the bitter deep withdraw Him
 'Neath the scourge and through the dole!
Her sweet Son she contemplated
Nailed to death, and desolated,
 While He breathed away His soul.¹

Two sayings in the Holy Scriptures are most precious to Mrs. Browning: the words "Jesus wept" and the one where the Christ turned and

¹ This translation may be found in "The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning," edited by Frederic G. Kenyon, vol. ii, pp. 80, 81.

"looked upon Peter." Each gives to her the theme for a sonnet, the latter for two—two of the most emotion-fraught of all her detached sonnets. "The Look" and "The Meaning of the Look" are the titles. The pretty half-fanciful story in the poem "Memory and Hope" closes with a vision of Christ. Hope sees

that soft subduing look
Which Peter's spirit shook,

and then

Sank downward in a rapture to embrace
Thy piercèd hands and feet with kisses close,
And prayed Thee to assist her evermore
To "reach the things before."

The humanness of Christ makes strong appeal to her. To her his "divinest voice" is "complete in humanest affection." This thought she enforces in "The Poet's Vow." The meaning of this poem she tells us she intends to be that the "creature cannot be isolated from the creature." The friend who is represented in this poem as wishing to press his argument against the poet who desires to withdraw himself from all the responsibilities of the general human family, and to give himself up to a selfish enjoyment of life, makes a plea based upon the logic that since Christ appeared as man, since he for a time bore man's nature, therefore ever after the nature of man has a dignity, a worth,

and should have a special value for every seeing man.

What blessing can, from lips of man,
Approach thee with his sigh?
Ay, what from earth—create for man
And moaning in his moan?
Ay, what from stars—revealed to man
And man-named one by one?
Ay, more! what blessing can be given
Where the Spirits seven do show in heaven
A MAN upon the throne?
A man on earth HE wandered once,
All meek and undefiled,
And those who loved Him said “He wept”-
None ever said He smiled;
Yet there might have been a smile unseen,
When He bowed his holy face, I ween,
To bless that happy child.
And now HE pleadeth up in heaven
For our humanities,
Till the ruddy light on seraph’s wings
In pale emotion dies.
They can better bear their Godhead’s glare
Than the pathos of his eyes.
I will go pray our God to-day
To teach thee how to scan
His work divine, for human use
Since earth on axle ran,—
To teach thee to discern as plain
His grief divine, the blood-drop’s stain
He left there, MAN for man.
So, for the blood’s sake shed by Him
Whom angels God declare,
Tears like it, moist and warm with love,
Thy reverent eyes shall wear
To see i’ the face of Adam’s race
The nature God doth share.

But although the mind of the poet followed the course of the earthly life of Christ with closely scanning eye in all its detail, it was his death that stirred her heart to its deepest depths. With what reverence and yet with what tenderness she breathes his name when she thinks of his death! Her wonderful dramatic poem, "The Seraphim," is from beginning to end an expression of this feeling, as a series of quotations will show. She imagines Ador the strong angel and Zerah the loving one to stand at heaven's door about to speed forth to earth to be present with a battalion of seraphs at the crucifixion of our Lord. As they stand there in the pause before setting forth, they talk peacefully together. They are speaking of the vast difference between the state of earth as they see it and the vision of what it was to be that God had at the first, and they wonder that so great a change can have taken place that his Son—God's Son—should be brought to the cross. Yet Ador recalls the angel's song of Peace on Earth that was sung at the beginning of Christ's life.

Ador. Peace, where He is.

Zerah.

He!

Say it again.

Ador.

Where He is.

Zerah.

Can it be

That earth retains a tree

Whose leaves like Eden foliage, can be swayed

By the breathing of his voice, nor shrink and fade?

Ador. There is a tree!—it hath no leaf nor root;
Upon it hangs a curse for all its fruit;

Its shadow on his head is laid.

For He, the crownèd Son,

Has left his crown and throne,

Walks earth in Adam's clay,

Eve's snake to bruise and slay—

Zerah. Walks earth in clay?

Ador. And walking in the clay which he created,
He through it shall touch death.

What do I utter? what conceive? did breath

Of demon howl it in a blasphemy?

Or was it mine own voice, informed, dilated

By the seven confluent Spirits?— Speak—answer me!

Who said man's victim was his deity?

Zerah. Beloved, beloved, the word came forth from thee.
Thine eyes are rolling a tempestuous light

Above, below, around,

As putting thunder-questions without cloud,

Reverberate without sound,

To universal nature's depth and height.

The tremor of an inexpressive thought

Too self-amazed to shape itself aloud,

O'erruns the awful curving of thy lips;

And while thine hands are stretched above,

As newly they had caught

Some lightning from the throne, or showed the Lord

Some retributive sword,

Thy brows do alternate with wild eclipse

And radiance, with contrasted wrath and love,

As God had called thee to a seraph's part,

With a man's quailing heart.

In this dramatic way the emotion of the two angels is indicated as they stand there looking toward the woeful earth, and weep at the thought of the divine sacrifice that is being made. Then cries Ador:

O man! and is thy nature so defiled
That all that holy Heart's devout law-keeping,
And low pathetic beat in deserts wild,
And gushings pitiful of tender weeping
For traitors who consigned it to such woe—
That all could cleanse thee not, without the flow
Of blood, the lifeblood—*his*—and streaming *so?*
O earth the thundercleft, windshaken, where
The louder voice of “blood and blood” doth rise,
Hast thou an altar for this sacrifice?

O Heaven! O vacant throne!
O crownèd hierarchies that wear your crown
When his is put away!
Are ye unshamèd that ye cannot dim
Your alien brightness to be liker him,
Assume a human passion, and down-lay
Your sweet secureness for congenial fears,
And teach your cloudless ever-burning eyes
The mystery of his tears?

By the heart-searching pathos of this thought
Zerah the loving angel is stung into strength and
determination. He cries out:

I am strong, I am strong.
Were I never to see my heaven again,
I would wheel to earth like the tempest rain
Which sweeps there with an exultant sound
To lose its life as it reaches the ground.

I am strong, I am strong.
Away from mine inward vision swim
The shining seats of my heavenly birth,
I see but his, I see but Him—
The Maker's steps on his cruel earth.
Will the bitter herbs of earth grow sweet
To me, as trodden by his feet?
Will the vexed, accurst humanity,
As worn by Him, begin to be

A blessed, yea, a sacred thing
For love and awe and ministering?

I am strong, I am strong.

By our angel ken shall we survey
His loving smile through his woeful clay?

I am swift, I am strong,

The love is bearing me along.

So the two angels are borne earthward by the strong impulsion of their love. Their longing spiritually leads them.

These are poetic strains of the uplifted rhapsodist, yet they are tenderly human. Zerah says to Ador:

Thy look
Is fixed on earth, as mine upon thy face.
Where shall I seek his?

I have thrown
One look upon earth, but one,
Over the blue mountain-lines,
Over the forest of palms and pines,
Over the harvest-lands golden,
Over the valleys that fold in
The gardens and vines—

He is not there.

All these are unworthy
Those footsteps to bear,
Before which, bowing down

I would fain quench the stars of my crown
In the dark of the earthly.
Where shall I seek Him?

Temple and tower,
Palace and purple would droop like a flower
(Or a cloud at our breath),
If he neared in His state
The outermost gate.

Ador. Ah me, not so
In the state of a king did the victim go!

And THOU who hangest mute of speech
'Twixt heaven and earth, with forehead yet
 Stained by the bloody sweat,

God! man! Thou hast foregone thy throne in each.
Zerah. Thine eyes behold Him?

Ador. Yea, below.

Track the gazing of mine eyes,
Naming God within thine heart
That its weakness may depart
 And the vision rise!

Seest thou yet, beloved?

Zerah. I see

Beyond the city, crosses three
And mortals three that hang thereon
'Ghast and silent to the sun.
Round them blacken and welter and press
Staring multitudes whose father
Adam was, whose brows are dark
With his Cain's corroded mark,—
Who curse with looks. Nay—let me rather
Turn unto the wilderness!

Ador. Turn not! God dwells with men.

Zerah. Above

He dwells with angels, and they love.
Can these love? With the living's pride
They stare at those who die, who hang
In their sight and die. They bear the streak
Of the crosses' shadow, black not wide,
To fall on their heads, as it swerves aside

 When the victim's pang
 Makes the dry wood creak.

Ador. The cross—the cross!

Zerah now perceives a woman kneeling whose
tears drop down—

Tears! the lovingest man
Has no better bestowed
Upon man.

But the Crucified One is not in need of tears. Then the watching angels see the two malefactors; unlike they are. One is a man who bears the present marks of sin; but the other—

Death upon his face
Is rather shine than shade,
A tender shine by looks belovèd made:
He seemeth dying in a quiet place,
And less by iron wounds in hands and feet
Than heart-broke by new joy too sudden and sweet.

And then in a silence which is not the silence of death nor yet of sleep, but which spreads through the whole universe like a pulse of creation, they see the One upon the cross. Zerah looks and the flame perishes in his eyes. To Ador's tender inquiry Zerah answers:

He opened his,
And looked. I cannot bear—
Ador. Their agony?
Zerah. Their love. God's depth is in them. From his
brows
White, terrible in meekness, didst thou see
The lifted eyes unclose?
He is God, seraph!

Ador. The loving is
Sublimed within them by the sorrowful.
In heaven we could sustain them.

The two seraphs wonder to see the Jehovah-man renouncing until he seems to be feebler than his work, sadder than his creature,

With unkinged brow!
Grief-bearer for thy world,

"But the love," cries Zerah, "the love, mine
Ador!"

Ador. Do we love not?

Zerah. Yea,

But not as man shall! . . .

Ador. Love him more! O man,
 Than sinless seraphs can!

Zerah. Yea, love him more!

Voices of the Angelic Multitude. Yea, more!

Ador. The loving word

Is caught by those from whom we stand apart.

For silence hath no deepness in her heart

Where love's low name low breathed would not be heard

By angels, clear as thunder.

Angelic Voices. Love him more!

Ador. Sweet voices, swooning o'er
 The music which ye make!

Albeit to love there were not ever given

A mournful sound when uttered out of heaven,

That angel-sadness ye would fitly take.

Of love be silent now! we gaze adown

Upon the incarnate Love who wears no crown.

Zerah. The pathos hath the day undone:

The death-look of his eyes

Hath overcome the sun

And made it sicken in its narrow skies.

Ador. Is it to death? He dieth.

Zerah. Through the dark

He still, he only, is discernible—

The naked hands and feet transfixèd stark,

The countenance of patient anguish white,

Do make themselves a light

More dreadful than the glooms which round them dwell,

And therein do they shine.

Ador. God! Father-God!

Both angels now offer to the Father an impas-

sioned prayer that he would come and help and succor the One suffering upon the cross. But no ray of light shines down from the throne above, and soon the Voice from the Cross is heard to cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou me forsaken?" The Voice of the Earth now speaks:

Ah me, ah me, ah me! the dreadful Why!
My sin is on thee, sinless one! Thou art
God-orphaned, for my burden on thy head.
Dark sin, white innocence, endurance dread!
Be still, within your shrouds, my buried dead;
Nor work with this quick horror round mine heart.

And now huddling fallen angels draw near, crying,
"Do we prevail?"

Voice from the Cross. It is finished!

Zerah. Hark, again!

Like a victor speaks the slain.

Angel Voices. Finished be the trembling vain!

Ador. Upward, like a well-loved son,

Looketh he, the orphaned one.

Angel Voices. Finished is the mystic pain.

Voices of Fallen Angels. His deathly forehead at the word

Gleameth like a seraph sword.

Angel Voices. Finished is the demon reign.

Ador. His breath, as living God, createth,

His breath, as dying man, completeth.

Angel Voices. Finished work his hands sustain.

Now the most ancient Voice of the Earth is heard reciting a rune that tells how Adam unawakened by the knocking of his children at his tomb through four thousand years, undisturbed by the groans of

creation, starts with sudden life as he hears a Voice from the Cross, "Father! my spirit to thine hands is given!" And Ador, the strong angel, finds words to describe the earthly scene:

Hear the wailing winds that be
By wings of unclean spirits made!
They, in that last look, surveyed
The love they lost in losing heaven,
And passionately flee
With a desolate cry that cleaves
The natural storms—though *they* are lifting
God's strong cedar-roots like leaves,
And the earthquake and the thunder,
Neither keeping either under,
Roar and hurtle through the glooms—
And a few pale stars are drifting
Past the dark, to disappear,
What time, from the splitting tombs
Gleamingly the dead arise,
Viewing with their death-calmed eyes
The elemental strategies,
To witness, victory is the Lord's.
Hear the wail o' the spirits! hear!

And Zerah, the angel of love, answers,

I hear alone the memory of his words.

And in this receding wave of tragic pathos the imagined scene is swept away and the poem closes. The impression left is one of personal grief, of a personal love. What other poet has brought the Christ so near, has so endeared him, has made in the heart of the listener a like remorseful pity?

When "The Seraphim" was given to the world

the writer was almost unknown, and the critics as with one voice lifted up the cry of sacrilege. The reader of to-day wonders how that accusation could ever have been made against this most reverent work. Certainly the truly devotional heart can find nothing in it to jar the most prayerful hour. The young poet had the wisdom to avoid any attempt at direct realism. The story is told from the standpoint of two intensely interested on-lookers, so giving a sense of distance that softens the crudeness of minute detail yet does not lessen the poignancy of the great emotional crisis; while the charming quality of the two highly individualized seraphs, the angel of love and the angel of strength, employs the superfluous energy of the reader's interest and leaves the deeper consciousness free to dwell undisturbed upon the great features of the tragedy.

Another complaint that the young poet had to meet was that she had trespassed upon literary ground sacred to Milton. This accusation applied to this dialogue, "The Seraphim," and also to the "Drama of Exile," where she takes up the story of our first parents at the moment when they are thrust out of their home in Eden and follows them as they fled along the sword-glare outside the gate. No attempt is to be made here to appraise the literary merits of Mrs. Browning's poetry; but we

may be forgiven if we call attention to the fact that no poet can preëmpt sections in any part of space, even in chaos. Mrs. Browning made a modest comment on a part of the story of Adam and Eve that Milton might have written but did not; and, as he did not, she had all right to throw her rosy radiance thereon, especially as her scene of action lies outside the gate instead of within! And as to "The Seraphim" no one could have had a more humble estimate than herself. The subject seemed to her a daring one; it was beyond our sympathies, she said, and therefore beyond the sphere of poetry. It lacked unity, and she repeatedly called it a failure. Yet who has written a poem that has so made us love Jesus Christ? Certainly the "Paradise Regained," though preferred by its author over his vastly superior work, has never recommended the Crucified One so to our very heart as has the humbler transcript by the less ambitious poet.

Besides many transcripts of incidents in the life of Christ and this one great dramatic poem upon the event of his death, Mrs. Browning has poured forth her devotion to the name of Jesus in four beautiful hymns: "A Supplication for Love," "The Mediator," "The Weeping Saviour," and "The Measure"—the one a plea for love in the church by the dying love of the Lord Christ, the second

an impassioned outpouring of the heart in gratitude to God for that expression of his greatness in the Son, of his purity and strength and kindness in the Son's pure hands, and of Christ's appeal against the divine justice through his love.

THE MEDIATOR

How high Thou art! our songs can own

No music Thou couldst stoop to hear!

But still the Son's expiring groan

Is vocal in the Father's ear.

How pure Thou art! our hands are dyed

With curses, red with murder's hue—

But HE hath stretched HIS hands to hide

The sins that pierced them from thy view.

How strong Thou art! we tremble lest

The thunders of thine arm be moved—

But HE is lying on thy breast,

And Thou must clasp thy Best-beloved!

How kind Thou art! Thou didst not choose

To joy in Him forever so;

But that embrace Thou wilt not loose

For vengeance, didst for love forego!

High God, and pure, and strong, and kind!

The low, the foul, the feeble, spare!

Thy brightness in his face we find—

Behold our darkness only *there!*

The other two poems in this group of hymns speak of the human tears of Christ over the bier of his friend and of our own human tears which God has reckoned in a "measure"—the same "measure" with which he has "comprehended the dust

of the earth." The word for "measure," the young Greek and Hebrew scholar tells us in a footnote, is the same in the Hebrew Scriptures in the two places and occurs nowhere else in that book.

None of these poems are properly hymns—that is, they are evidently not written for singing. In the volume of 1833, however, which contained her translation of the "Prometheus Bound," there were included also, not without apology, a few other poems written by the translator. Among them were several that show the young poet's devotion to Christ. "Earth," "The Image of God," "Idols," "Weariness," "The Appeal," are titles of some of these. But, above all, there is a hymn of seven rarely beautiful stanzas that shows the same spirit. This hymn was the only poem selected by her from the volume of 1833 for preservation in a following collection, and it well deserves cherishing—and singing too. A part is here quoted:

Since without Thee we do no good,
And with Thee do no ill,
Abide with us in weal and woe,—
In action and in will.
• • • • •

By hours of day, that when our feet
O'er hill and valley run,
We still may think the light of truth
More welcome than the sun.

By hours of night, that when the air
Its dew and shadow yields,
We still may hear the voice of God
In silence of the fields.

Abide with *us*, abide with *us*,
While flesh and soul agree;
And when our flesh is only dust,
Abide our souls with *Thee*.

In every way the thought of Jesus is made a comfort. In “A Thought for a Lonely Deathbed” she recalls the “permitted desolations” of his life—the “drear wine-press,” the “wilderness outspread,” the “lone garden,” and prays by all of these that he will come to help.

No earthly friend being near me, interpose
No deathly angel ’twixt my face and thine,
But stoop Thyself to gather my life’s rose,
And smile away my mortal to Divine!

And in her thought of heaven the chief attraction is that Christ will at last be seen by her own eyes!

Speak low to me, my Saviour, low and sweet
From out the hallelujahs, sweet and low
Lest I should fear and fall, and miss Thee so
Who art not missed by any that entreat.

But Jesus Christ was far more to her than a subject full of literary material; he was the manifestation of God. “God’s will is so high above humanity,” she wrote in 1840, “that its goodness and perfectness cannot be scanned at a glance, and would be very terrible if it were not for His

manifested love—manifested in Jesus Christ. Only *that* holds out hearts together when He shatters the world."

Never does she show that this view of Christ's being and character besets her with any intellectual difficulty. On the contrary, she thought that there was nothing so "ennobling to the nature and mind of man as the view which represents it raised into communion with God himself by the justification and purification of God himself. Plato's dream brushed by the gate of this doctrine when it walked highest, and won for him the title 'Divine.'"

It is as God that she thinks of Jesus Christ in his human life. A stanza in "The Soul's Traveling" shows how fully she identifies Christ and God:

O blissful Mouth which breathed the mournful breath
We name our souls, self-spoil!—by that strong passion
Which paled Thee once with sighs, by that strong death
Which made Thee once unbreathing—from the wrack
Themselves have called around them, call them back,
Back to Thee in continuous aspiration!

For here, O Lord,
For here they travel vainly, vainly pass
From city-pavement to untrodden sward
Where the lark finds her deep nest in the grass
Cold with the earth's last dew. Yea, very vain
The greatest speed of all these souls of men
Unless they travel upward to the throne
Where sittest THOU the satisfying ONE,

With help for sins and holy perfectings
For all requirements: while the archangel, raising
Unto thy face his full ecstatic gazing,
Forgets the rush and rapture of his wings.

The divinity of Christ she implies everywhere.

The man most man, with tenderest human hands,
Works best for men,—as God in Nazareth.

And again:

God's self would never have come down to die,
Could man have thanked Him for it.

And when in that wonderful zodiac vision in the
“Drama of Exile” Christ appears and says, “I
am here,” Adam is made to respond, “This is
God!” It was as God that she thinks of him
after the close of his life on earth. He represents
the Divine in the onward going of history. In
“De Profundis” she says:

He reigns below, He reigns alone,
And, having life in love foregone
Beneath the crown of sovran thorns,
He reigns the Jealous God. Who mourns
Or rules with Him, while days go on?

In “The Cry of the Human” the answerless
questions that beset the human soul are drawn up
in line, the tempest, the battle, the plague, the
greed of man and the inequalities of human con-
dition working woe to the unfortunate and the
inadequate, the shortness of human love, sickness

and—death; then in one sweep her faith looks up and over all:

Then, soul of mine,
Look up and triumph rather!
Lo, in the depth of God's Divine
The Son adjures the Father,
Be pitiful, O God!

“Never at any point of my life,” she said in 1854, “and now, thank God, least of all, have I felt myself drawn toward Unitarian opinions. I should throw up revelation altogether if I ceased to recognize Christ as Divine.” Again, it seemed to her, she said, that the Unitarians threw over what was “most beautiful in Christian doctrine.” And thus she went on to the end, “believing in Christ’s divinity, which is the life of Christianity,” as she said in a letter written in the spring of 1861, just a short time before her death.

When she looks upon the life and work of Christ upon earth as representing the Divine come to man, she still sees that his death is the most notable event in that life:

The Christ Himself had been no Lawgiver
Unless He had given the life, too, with the law.

Without dogmatizing on the theories of various theologians she recognizes that Christ is mysteriously essential in the work of subduing sin, as she shows in “The Weeping Saviour”; and that the

very cross itself is a manifestation of God's love to his Son. What would humanity have been if Christ had not come to bring life and immortality to light? In "Aurora Leigh" she says:

For us, we are called to mark
A still more intimate humanity
In this inferior nature, or ourselves
Must fall like dead leaves trodden underfoot
By veritable artists. Earth (shut up
By Adam, like a fakir in a box
Left too long buried) remained stiff and dry,
A mere dumb corpse, till Christ the Lord came down
Unlocked the doors, forced open the blank eyes,
And used his kingly chrism to straighten out
The leathery tongue turned back into the throat;
Since when, she lives, remembers, palpitates
In every limb, aspires in every breath,
Embraces infinite relations.

To her, Christ was the foundation of character; in her philosophy the only place where the virtues could grow was

In that sole garden where Christ's brow dropped blood.

This for the individual; and, as to mankind at large,

The soul's the way. Not even Christ Himself
Can save man else than as He holds man's soul;
And therefore did He come into our flesh
As some wise hunter creeping on his knees,
With a torch, into the blackness of a cave,
To face and quell the beast there—take the soul,
And so possess the whole man, body and soul.

So Christ, by giving the knowledge of immortal

life and by pointing out the way of life in human affairs and by substantiating his teachings by his life and death, brought to human endeavor a motive and an inspiration which is as marked and startling as would be a resurrection from the dead, and which is as an abundant and irrepressible inflowing of dynamic life into the whole dead world. And this shall go on. "For civilization perfected," she says in "*Italy and the World*," "is fully developed Christianity." She had a strong, buoyant faith in the ultimate outcome for good. She believed too actively in God's goodness to share the gloomy views that were so large a part of a faithful Christian's duty at the time when her young theories were crystallizing. Whatever her theories, an ultimate optimism was a belief accepted unquestioningly.

But the end she looked for was no spectacular drama; she doubted whether Christ's second coming would be personal. She said: "What I expect is, a great development of Christianity in opposition to the churches, and of humanity generally in opposition to the nations, and I look out for this in much quiet hope."

In spite of this definitely crystallized body of opinions, Mrs. Browning's attitude is far from being, within evangelical limits, sectarian. To her there was only "one church in heaven and earth,

with one Divine High Priest to it—let exclusive religionists build what walls they pleased and bring out what chrisms.” As to the church in general, she sometimes lifted up her voice in reproof—though not harshly.

I hence appeal
To the dear Christian Church—

is the form of her exhortation. In her reproof she identifies herself with the church, as in “A Supplication for Love”; and when she says,

God, namèd Love, whose fount Thou art,
Thy crownless Church before Thee stands,
With too much hating in her heart,
And too much striving in her hands!—

she has humbly included herself in the prayer for grace.

CHAPTER V

THE WORLD OF NATURE

IN a beautiful poem on “The Poet” Mrs. Browning describes him as one who has

the child’s sight in his breast
And sees all *new*;

who “views with the first glory” “what oftenest he has viewed.” She was herself of this race by the right sign. To her the world was a source of perpetual wonder.

Nothing should surprise us any more,
Who see that miracle of stars,

would be what she would say. So all the world of nature and of God the Creator thereof was taken by her on the same terms of inexplicable mystery. To one to whom the miracle of the creation and existence of God has passed the gateway of doubt, the voice of nature could not be forbiddingly cold. She heard that voice when she imagined that Nature came boldly and said, “I am ambassador for God!” So then to her, nature was, if rightly understood, all good. Yet was it not always understood; for her, nature included a realm of supernature where higher laws and higher ideals held sway.

Oh, beautiful
Art thou, Earth,

she cried in "Earth and Her Praisers"; yet she added,

albeit worse
Than in heaven is callèd good!

And again,

Alas, our earthly good
In heaven thought evil, seems too good for Thee,

said the Virgin Mary to the child Jesus. Yet good, eminently good, is the realm of earth. She can even sometimes look over and beyond the darker facts of existence and still see the vision of good. Aurora says to Romney:

" You believe
In God, for your part?—ay? that He who makes
Can make good things from ill things, best from worst,
As men plant tulips upon dunghills when
They wish them finest?"

And he answers:

" True. A death-heat is
The same as life-heat, to be accurate,
And in all nature is no death at all,
As men account of death, so long as God
Stands witnessing for life perpetually,
By being just God."

In the end one's faith can include the conception that

The circle of God's life
Contains all life beside.

And in this thought her faith was imbedded so

deeply that she was sometimes impatient with the intellectual pride of

our modern thinker who turns back
The strata . . . granite, limestone, coal, and clay,
Concluding coldly with "Here's law! where's God?"

A pagan, kissing for a step of Pan
The wild-goat's hoof-print on the loamy down,

stands in a higher rank than does that man of latest knowledge. Then again she sends forth a blast against the materialist, as in the following passage from "Aurora Leigh":

Everywhere

We're too materialistic,—eating clay
(Like men of the west) instead of Adam's corn
And Noah's wine—clay by handfuls, clay by lumps,
Until we're filled up to the throat with clay,
And grow the grimy color of the ground
On which we are feeding. Ay, materialist
The age's name is. God Himself, with some,
Is apprehended as the bare result
Of what his hand materially has made,
Expressed in such an algebraic sign
Called God—that is, to put it otherwise,
They add up nature to a nought of God,
And cross the quotient. There are many even,
Whose names are written in the Christian Church
To no dishonor, diet still on mud
And splash the altars with it. You might think
The clay Christ laid upon their eyelids when,
Still blind, He called them to the use of sight,
Remained there to retard its exercise
With clogging incrustations. Close to heaven,
They see for mysteries, through the open doors,
Vague puffs of smoke from pots of earthenware,

And fain would enter, when their time shall come,
With quite another body than Saint Paul
Has promised—husk and chaff, the whole barley-corn,
Or where's the resurrection?

Nature is a great symbol; it affords on all sides and in every concrete example a lesson of the higher things. The thorny bloom of the gorse, growing bleakly on the mountain heights, yields her its word, teaching us,

From that academic chair
Canopied with azure air,

the lesson of living on the heights yet “low along the ground beside the grasses meek.” But we must go farther. Speaking for the clan of poets, she admonishes:

For us, we are called to mark
A still more intimate humanity
In this inferior nature, or ourselves
Must fall like dead leaves trodden under foot
By veritable artists.

This “still more intimate humanity” is a close and almost mystic tie between the heart of man and the “solemn-beating heart” of nature. In the “Drama of Exile” the angel Gabriel, arguing against Lucifer, says:

Through heaven and earth
God's will moves freely, and I follow it,
As color follows light. He overflows
The firmamental walls with deity,
Therefore with love; his lightnings go abroad,
His pity may do so, his angels must,
Whene'er He gives them charges.

"As color follows light"—so intimate is the tie between the Being of God and the souls he has created. Again, as color is to form, so close is the relation of beauty to love in the sweep of divine energy through the universe. Let the whole passage in all its dramatic strength be read. Lucifer is speaking:

Look on me, woman! Am I beautiful?

and Eve makes answer:

Thou hast a glorious darkness.

Lucifer Nothing more?

Eve. I think, no more.

Lucifer. False Heart—thou thinkest more!

Thou canst not choose but think, as I praise God,

Unwillingly but fully, that I stand

Most absolute in beauty. As yourselves

Were fashioned very good at best, so *we*

Sprang very beauteous from the creant Word

Which thrilled behind us, God himself being moved

When that august work of a perfect shape,

His dignities of sovran angelhood,

Swept out into the universe,—divine

With thunderous movements, earnest looks of gods,

And silver-solemn clash of cymbal wings.

Whereof was I, in motion and in form,

A part not poorest. And yet,—yet, perhaps,

This beauty which I speak of is not here,

As God's voice is not here, nor even my crown—

I do not know. What is this thought or thing

Which I call beauty? Is it thought, or thing?

Is it a thought accepted for a thing?

Or both? or neither?—a pretext—a word?

Its meaning flutters in me like a flame

Under my own breath: my perceptions reel

For evermore around it, and fall off,
As if it too were holy.

Eve. Which it is.

Adam. The essence of all beauty, I call love.
The attribute, the evidence, and end,
The consummation to the inward sense,
Of beauty apprehended from without,
I still call love. As form, when colorless,
Is nothing to the eye,—that pine-tree there,
Without its black and green, being all a blank,—
So, without love, is beauty undiscerned
In man or angel. Angel! rather ask
What love is in thee, what love moves to thee,
And what collateral love moves on with thee;
Then shalt thou know if thou art beautiful.

Thus Lucifer—alas, poor angel!—learns that human beings have a language that he cannot understand; and, while a “starry harmony remote” comes nearer and seems to “measure the heights from whence he fell,” he breathes the question and the wonder of his lost soul—

Love! what is love? I lose it. Beauty and love!
I darken to the image. Beauty—love!

He fades away, while a low music sounds, leaving Adam and Eve to whisper happiness to each other that they have found out that “by the love and faith” they do “exceed the stature of this angel.”

Her cosmic imagination dwells upon the creation of worlds. In the “Drama of Exile” she puts into the lips of Christ these words:

Eternity stands alway fronting God;
A stern colossal image, with blind eyes

And grand dim lips that murmur evermore
God, God, God! while the rush of life and death,
The roar of act and thought, of evil and good,
The avalanches of the ruining worlds
Tolling down space,—the new world's genesis
Budding in fire,—the gradual humming growth
Of the ancient atoms and first forms of earth,
The slow procession of the swathing seas
And firmamental waters,—and the noise
Of the broad, fluent strata of pure airs,—
All these flow onward in the intervals
Of that reiterated sound of—GOD!
Which WORD innumerous angels straightway lift
Wide on celestial altitudes of song
And choral adoration, and then drop
The burden softly, shutting the last notes
In silver wings.

Some mystic theory of the emergence of worlds always had attractions for her; yet the doctrine of evolution as it became popularized in her early years she did not receive favorably. Mrs. Jameson tried vainly to convince her that the "Vestiges of Creation" was a most comforting work, but she took it to be one of the most melancholy, and persisted in a "determinate counsel" not to be a fully developed monkey if she could help it. That was in 1847; perhaps she becomes more reconciled afterward, for eight years later she lets Romney bolster up his argument with Aurora by the following:

It had not much

Consoled the race of mastodons to know,
Before they went to fossil, that anon
Their place would quicken with the elephant.

But though the doctrine frequently seemed offensive to her in its particular application, in the large it passed muster more easily. The future outward developments swept in long reaches before her spirit and led on to the more familiar glories of a millennial epoch. God acknowledged the "leal and earnest search" of man "for Fair and Right, through doubtful forms by earth accounted real,"

The ultimate Perfection leaning bright
From out the sun and stars to bless.

Mrs. Browning's visions of the creation of the world are Miltonic rather than biblical. Was there a time of primal innocence for the race of man? In "The Seraphim" she uses the thought in the structure of the story, and again in the "Drama of Exile." At the gate of Eden, which is now built up with "a final cloud of sunset," Gabriel appears to interrupt the blatant boasting of Lucifer:

This is not heaven, even in a dream, nor earth,
As earth was once, first breathed among the stars,
Articulate glory from the mouth divine,
To which the myriad spheres thrilled audibly,
Touched like a lutestring, and the sons of God
Said AMEN, singing it.

And as the two seraphim, who are to go to earth to be near the Christ at the hour of his crucifixion,

wait for the moment to come when they shall set forth, Ador says to Zerah,

Didst thou bear thee
Ever to this earth?

And Zerah answers:

Before.

When thrilling from His hand along
Its lustrous path with spheric song
The earth was deathless, sorrowless,
Unfearing, then, pure feet might press
The grasses brightening with their feet,
For God's own voice did mix its sound
In a solemn confluence oft
With the river's flowing round,
And the life-tree's waving soft.
Beautiful new earth and strange!

The idea that the inharmoniousness in nature's world, as well as in the human life, is due to the entrance of sin, seems to have been with her not a poetic fancy only. The steps of the "wandering sinners," Adam and Eve, struck "a sense of death to me," says the Spirit of Harmless Earth; then the heart of earth, once calm, trembled like the "ragged foam along the ocean-waves" and the "restless earthquakes rocked against each other."

For to

Him, whose forming word
Gave to Nature flower and sward,
She hath given back again,
For the myrtle—the thorn,
For the sylvan calm—the human scorn.

Even in the little child, the “Adam in him” will forego “all privilege of Eden” and take away that sympathy with nature that belongs by right to the soul unvisited by sin. Another explanation of the intangible something wrong that all human beings recognize in the heart is perhaps attempted in the noble answer of Eve to the accusing Earth Spirits. With a delightful quaintness in method, the poet allows her heroine, the stricken Eve, to realize that the “sense of beauty and of melody” in her are aided no longer

by the sense

Of personal adjustment to those heights
Of what I see well-formed or hear well-tuned,
But rather coupled darkly and made ashamed
By my percipency of sin and fall
In melancholy of humiliant thoughts.

But there is a hopeful strain where the Earth Spirits again taunt Adam:

We, in heirdom of your soul,
Flash the river, lift the palm-tree,
 The dilated ocean roll,
By the thoughts that throbbed within
 you, round the islands.
Alp and torrent shall inherit
 Your significance of will,
And the grandeur of your spirit
 Shall our broad savannahs fill.

Turning from the vast to those forms of nature that come nearer and are more tangible, we see

what intimate friendships a poet who spent the greater part of her years in an invalid's room could have with such objects of nature as she could draw into the circle of acquaintance.

About twenty years of her early life she spent at Hope End, in the beautiful Malvern Hills—the hills of Piers Plowman's visions and of hers. Here she had every opportunity for close contact with natural loveliness in the gentle country about her and in the gardens of her father's estate, as certain poems show, especially "Hector in the Garden," "The Lost Bower," "The Deserted Garden," and "An Island," as well as many descriptions of English scenery elsewhere throughout the longer works. She had a garden of her own, which "she cut out into a great Hector of Troy, *in reliefō*, with a high heroic box nose and shoeties of columbine"—just as she describes in her poem "Hector." Those were the days when, as she said, the Greeks were her demigods and haunted her out of Pope's Homer, until she "dreamt more of Agamemnon than of Moses the black pony!" How else she dreamed the hours and the days away one may learn in "The Lost Bower." Then followed the second twenty years—but how different indeed were they! An enforced exile from life, she was shut in by walls made of London fog, chilling and heaven-high! Then later came the blessed release

through her happy marriage with Robert Browning, and the removal to Italy where the world with its treasures of mountain beauty was again thrown open to her eyes. The sea, however—that never came back to her—never after her brother's death.

In "An Island," that *tour de force* of pure fancy, she dreams of a perfect place for an ideal life. To this Utopia she was willing to have come only

Those who would change man's voice and use
For Nature's way and tone—
Man's veering heart and careless eyes
For Nature's steadfast sympathies.

And her list of the creatures she will allow to enter her quiet, peaceful paradise—the "free gamesome horses," the "buffaloes upon the slopes," the hedgehogs and the snakes—shows that her group for an arcadia was certainly formed upon catholic principles. It was a catalogue for an invalid walled in by London fog! Yet the prodigal beauty of the world—though sometimes two little tears sufficed to cover all—appealed to the secluded one in her room; and the things of nature that she did have in those imprisoned years she looked at so long and lovingly that she came to know them and to love them better than another more privileged might have done. During the London period the flowers she knows are mostly those that

come in the folds of a letter; but these can afford subject for a poem, though the matter be more in apology than otherwise for caring for so humble a thing.

A chamber window was the spot
It grew in, from a garden pot,
 Among the city shadows:
If any, tending it, might seem
To smile, 'twas only in a dream
 Of nature in the meadows.

Later, indeed, there were other flowers—those sent by Robert Browning which he cut from plants of his own careful tending in days when the possession of hothouse blooms was not the common experience that it is to-day. She loved camellias almost better than roses; and, to abuse herself with a vain deceit of rural life, she had ivy planted in a box in her room where it flourished and spread over one window, and struck against the glass with a little stroke from the thicker leaves, and then she thought of forests and groves.

Then there were the doves. She said once, "I hear and see nothing except my doves and the fireplace." Again she said: "My doves are my chief acquaintances, and I am so very intimate with them that they accept and even demand my assistance in building their innumerable nests." Finally, when a new little dove appeared from the shell, she said whimsically: "I and the senior doves

feel equally delighted and we all three in the capacity of good sitters and indefatigable putters-about take a good deal of credit upon ourselves.” Nothing needs to be said as to Mrs. Browning’s love for her dog Flush, that fine little companion who was certainly a gentleman and a poet if ever a dog was!—and who was careful and jealous about everything that belonged to his mistress, even to her Æolian harp. His devoted owner, who celebrated his virtues in the finest poem about a dog that was ever written—and we are remembering George Meredith and Swinburne as we say it—said at one time that she did not see why Miss Martineau’s apocalyptic housemaid could not speak out and prophesy whether Flush had a soul and what its future destination was to be. “As to the fact of his soul,” she said humorously, “I have long had a strong opinion on it.” Then she adds: “The grand *peut-être*, to which without revelation the human argument is reduced, covers dog-nature with the sweep of its fringes.” It is good to know that Flush lived to a ripe old age and now reposes honorably in the vaults of Casa Guidi.

When Mrs. Browning came to Italy she found some old friends: nightingales, of course, the opal snake, the large-mouthed frog, moths, butterflies, bats; and she made some new ones.

The fireflies of Italy interested her, those “lights-o-love”

that suspire
In short soft lapses of transported flame
Across the tingling Dark;

and the

melodious owls
(If music had but one note and was sad,
'Twould sound just so);

the lizards, the green lightning of the walls, and the crickets—her whole passage about the crickets is exquisite.

And now she saw for the first time great mountains, “jagged mountains, rolled together like pre-Adamite beasts and setting their teeth against the sky!” After a while she was able to go among them, and to see from above great seas of mountains “looking alive among the clouds,” as they did at the Bagni di Lucca and at other places where they went to escape the summer heat. Then she could feel as never before the “charm of the mountains, whose very heart you seem to hear beating in the rush of the little river, the green silence of the chestnut forests,” and they two could lose themselves “in the woods and mountains and sit by the waterfalls on the starry and moonlit nights.” So we understand who is really speaking when Aurora cries,

And now I come, my Italy,
My own hills! Are you 'ware of me, my hills,
How I burn toward you? do you feel to-night
The urgency and yearning of my soul,
As sleeping mothers feel the sucking babe
And smile?—Nay, not so much as when in heat
Vain lightnings catch at your inviolate tops
And tremble while ye are steadfast. Still ye go
Your own determined, calm, indifferent way
Toward sunrise, shade by shade, and light by light,
Of all the grand progression naught left out,
As if God verily made you for yourselves
And would not interrupt your life with ours.

She loved the Italian forests of chestnut and the olive groves “shading the ground with tents of silvery network,” and the “seclusion in the deep of the pine forests—which have such a strange dialect in the silence they speak with.” We can almost imagine that we see the little figure of the poet tucked away in a hamper that was being drawn upward into the hills, as she once was carried by two white bullocks. Perhaps in some Vallombrosan shade she calls a moment’s halt while they stand and listen to the silence; for to her sometimes

So sweet a silence ministered,
God seemed to use it for a word.

We have seen how the mind of the poet has dwelt on the mystery of color and has spiritualized its meaning; we do not need to be told that she has an ear that is sensitive to all nature’s sounds and

silences. An early poem called "Sounds" shows her thought of how the pulses of the universe in river and in ocean, in the voice of the woodland dove which is "like a singing in a dream," of the lark who,

with more of mirth
In his song than suits the earth,
Droppeth some in soaring high
To pour the rest out in the sky,

and in all the groans and sobs and palpitations of mankind, lead up to the still small voice that speaks in the soul of man.

Let it be said in passing that the lark cannot complain that it has not had its fair share of tribute from Mrs. Browning. If all her lovely sayings about this long-established Royal Majesty of birds were selected and fitted together into one work—were such a thing possible—the poem would be a worthy member in the poetic lark-sisterhood. That, of course, is saying a good deal, but not too much.

In the exquisite use of silence she was a prophecy of Maeterlinck, or rather of the fine sensitiveness to delicate and meaning silences which is a characteristic of the poetry of to-day. She must have loved silence for itself alone.

In compensation for our stormy years,
she prayed,

Vouchsafe us such a half-hour's hush alone,

as was that “silence in heaven about the space of half an hour” of which we read in the Revelation. She could use silence for a word, even for the meaning of many a word, and especially for things that could not be put into words. In “Aurora Leigh” she once utilizes a moment of utter stillness with a dramatic effect such as is seen in that beautiful instance in the “Idylls of the King” where, in the pause of King Arthur’s speech to the repentant Guinevere at the Holy House of Almsbury, “far off a solitary trumpet blew.” In both “The Seraphim” and the “Drama of Exile” the conclusion is accentuated by the compelling force of a heavily weighted silence. To her silence was a sister of music and had in it “a sense of music which was rather felt than heard.” She guessed that when the nightingale is loitering in the Happy Islands she is there “learning music from the silence”; and when the angels gather round a sleeping child,

'Tis the child-heart draws them, singing
In the silent-seeming clay—
Singing!—stars that seem the mutest go in music all the way.

Then the soft dim sounds that are next door to silence are very exquisite to her ear. In “A Drama of Exile,” when the Spirits of the Harmless Earth began to speak, Adam cried out,

O bleak sound,
O shadow of sound, O phantasm of thin sound!

and as they still came “wheeling and wheeling in continuous wail around the cyclic zodiac,” that “phantasm of thin sound” drew

a straight line of articulate song
From out that spiral faintness of lament,

that, by one voice, could express many griefs. In that drama of our first parents, it was a most excellent conception which made the spirits of the trees and the rivers and the flowers of Eden breathe forth farewells to the exiled pair as they passed beyond the gate and down the path of the sword-glare. Then all the happy sounds of Eden say their good-byes, “expiring at Eden’s door.”

The sylvan sounds, no longer audible,
Expire at Eden’s door.

Each footstep of your treading
Treads out some murmur which ye heard before.
Farewell! the trees of Eden
Ye shall hear nevermore.

.
How the silence round you shivers,
While our voices through it go,
Cold and clear.

At the end there is silence. Adam and Eve pursue their way into the far wilderness. There is a sound through the silence, as of the falling tears of an angel.

In this conclusion we see an approach to the extrasensual method of description which always

gave her so much delight, and which again is a prophecy of Maeterlinck in "The Intruder" and in "The Blind." In "The Lay of the Brown Rosary" one voice is described as being

so interwound
Of the dim and the sweet, 'tis a twilight of sound;

and in "The Lost Bower" the silence is mystically translated:

As I entered, mosses hushing
Stole all noises from my foot;
And a green elastic cushion,
Clasped within the linden's root
Took me in a chair of silence very rare and absolute.

So attractive is this borderland between sound and silence and so insistent is the temptation—if we should use so strong a word—to a method of expression that we would now classify as technically romantic and extrasensual, that now and then a symbol beckons and the poet can but follow.

The voice was calm and low,
And between each word you might have heard
The silent forests grow.

It is with some such transcendental interpretation that she addresses Hiram Powers' Greek Slave:

Appeal, fair stone,
From God's pure heights of beauty against man's wrong!
Catch up in thy divine face, not alone
East grieves but west, and strike and shame the strong,
By thunders of white silence, overthrown.

In these sincere touches of description born of a very delicate sense-perception Mrs. Browning shows the signs of kinship with the preraaphaelite group and—may we not say again?—of literary prophecy. Perhaps it was a feeling for those qualities in her poetry which made Ruskin¹ recommend together those “genuine works of feeling like ‘Maud’ and ‘Aurora Leigh’ and the grand preraaphaelite designs in painting.” In fact, most of her earlier descriptions go first or last beyond the bounds of the realistic impression. Let the painter try to bring the following to exact terms on canvas:

Two pale thin clouds did stand upon
The meeting line of sea and sky,
With aspect still and mystic:
I think they did foresee the sun,
And rested on their prophecy
In quietude majestic,

Then flushed to radiance where they stood,
Like statues by the open tomb
Of shining saints half risen.
The sun!—he came up to be viewed,
And sky and sea made mighty room
To inaugurate the vision.

I oft had seen the dawnlight run
As red wine through the hills, and break
Through many a mist’s inurning;
But, here, no earth profaned the sun:
Heaven, ocean, did alone partake
The sacrament of morning.

¹ See Appendix to the “Elements of Drawing,” by Ruskin.

God's sabbath morning sweeps the waves;
I would not praise the pageant high
Yet miss the dedicature:
I, carried toward the sinless graves
By force of natural things,—should I
Exult in only Nature?

The pigments refuse to suggest the likeness of the clouds to the “shining saints half risen.” But the poet has a right to the suggestion by the divine supremacy of his art. In the following picture of an English scene, where Aurora describes her memory of the view from her window at her English aunt’s home, how true it all seems! We see the English lawn,

Which, after sweeping broadly round the house,
Went trickling through the shrubberies in a stream
Of tender turf, and wore and lost itself
Among the acacias, over which you saw
The irregular line of elms by the deep lane
Which stopped the grounds and dammed the overflow
Of arbutus and laurel. . . .

. . . Behind the elms,
And through their tops, you saw the folded hills
Striped up and down with hedges (burly oaks
Projecting from the line to show themselves).

To this point we follow with ease; we see it all plainly and recognize it for truly English. Then Italianate Aurora dips the pen once more and tells what she sees further. There is a storm and a sunset; after that a “trance of passive glory,” and then

In apparition on the golden sky
(Alas, my Giotto's background!) the sheep run
Along the fine clear outline, small as mice
That run along a witch's scarlet thread.

Now, what shall we say to that? Nothing, except that we never saw it so, never saw such antics on such a sky line, but that we can, however, very easily believe that Aurora did. We believed in Tennyson's snow-draped peaks on the margin of his Lincolnshire marshes, and we can believe in Mrs. Browning's sky line, no matter how many sheep run along there like mice upon a witch's scarlet thread!

Mrs. Browning knew perfectly well what she was doing. Aurora marked her own "pastoral" a failure because

it was a book

Of surface-pictures—pretty, cold, and false
With literal transcript,—the worse done, I think,
For being not ill-done;

and in "Aurora Leigh" (VIII, 28-61) the poet shows that she can do the "literal transcript," the realistic landscape, in such massive pictures as the view of Florence from Bellosuardo. There is also a marvelous and highly romantic description of music in "The Lost Bower" (stanzas 35-48), of the temple of the poet in "A Vision of Poets" (214-250), a Turneresque picture; and the whole of "An Island" is of this kind and reminds one both of "The Lotos-eaters" and of "Kubla Khan." Then there

are romantic or idealistic landscapes in "The Romaunt of Margret" and in "Isobel's Child"; and many more passages might be named to illustrate her taste and method, a method which is but a part of the outreaching of her mind into the realms of the supersensual and of the realization that seems to have been constantly with her of the nearness and the realness of the spiritual. Her similes and metaphors show the same thing. She does not explain the things of the other world by pictures from this—instead she illuminates the things of this world by symbols from the other!—as if, indeed, the things of the spiritual world were more real and clarifying to her mind than the most evident facts from the human being's world could be. If she saw

headlong leaps
Of waters, that cry out for joy or fear
In leaping through the palpitating pines,

they were to her

Like a white soul tossed out to eternity
With thrills of time upon it.

To her the wood-ivy, like a spirit, hovers round the old hawthorn, and everywhere "mystic Presences of power" "upsnatch" her "to the timeless, then return" her "to the Hour." Everything in nature

Witnessed . . .

To the truth of things, with praises
Of the beauty of the truth.

CHAPTER VI

THE WORLD OF MANKIND

MRS. BROWNING's view of the human life and its activities is an unexpectedly vigorous one. Lying upon her couch in a room that had no outlook upon the London turmoil, no casement whence she could, like a modern Lady of Shalott, see the passing procession of human events, she yet found words to cry out, "Help, some angel!"—praying that she might be "no dreamer, no neglecter" in the need of the world.

Twining the vines about her unopened window that she may get some touch of summer country in her prisoning room, she thinks how she can answer her own prayer by letting her voice be heard all over the world recommending the best panacea to bring surcease of sorrow. At last, "get work, get work," she cries; "be sure 'tis better than what you work to get." What is the end of work? The work itself, the human activity itself, is an end sufficiently glorious and satisfying. And what if we fail? Then, we only do what others—many others—have done. We have good companionship! And it is disgraceful to sit beneath the stars and bemoan our fate.

Though we fail indeed,
You. . . I. . . a score of such weak workers, . . . He
Fails never. If he cannot work by us,
He will work over us. . . .

. . . Every time
The star winks there, so many souls are born,
Who all shall work too. Let our own be calm:
We should be ashamed to sit beneath those stars,
Impatient that we're nothing.

This is an outburst of stoic philosophy, but it is to be considered dramatically. Aurora Leigh is saying this to her fussy, priggish lover. Perhaps unconsciously Mrs. Browning is realizing that she has exalted her large-minded, deep-hearted, warm-blooded heroine at the expense of her hero, leaving him a prig and a despot, and that the process includes a necessity that Aurora should administer to him a little dose of powerful stoicism. However, it is a good motive—others being not handy at the moment—and harmonizes well in an ethical braid for chastisement where such is needed. Joy in the work! “To live in a house with windows on every side, so as to catch both the morning and the evening sunshine, is the best and brightest thing we have to do, to say nothing about the justest and wisest.” And she can wish nothing better for a friend than what she wrote to Ruskin —“a good clear noble year with plenty of work and God consciously over all to give you satisfaction.”

After all, it is the artist's joy; and all life was viewed by her, consciously or unconsciously, from the artist's standpoint. From this vantage ground of dignity one sees that there is nothing great and that there is nothing small; all work ranks the same with God, the supreme Artist. The worker sees that

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God.

And therefore the work in any material with any place or means is glorified.

The work itself—to have a work—is quite enough joy; but yet another is added. Whatever we do, it makes no difference what it is, we are answering the need of the world. The world needs all. And our love, behind our work, will propel it to the places of exact fitness and acceptability!

The world waits
For help. Beloved, let us love so well,
Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born.

So our work returns to us over-sweetened in comfort and joy.

There is another compensation. God did not “anoint us with his odorous oil” to “reign” but to “wrestle”;

and He assigns
All thy tears over, like pure crystallines,
For younger fellow-workers of the soil
To wear for amulets. So others shall
Take patience, labor, to their heart and hand,
From thy hand and thy heart and thy brave cheer,
And God's grace fructify through thee to all.

This is not far from the teaching of George Eliot in her "Choir Invisible"; but Mrs. Browning puts a purpose and an inspiration into the humdrum of human labor that George Eliot's heavy hand was never able to lift itself to write. The sonnet closes with this couplet:

The least flower with a brimming cup may stand
And share its dewdrop with another near.

And yet a step further:

Let others miss me! never miss me, God!

This is the tenor of the earlier poet's advice. Moreover, she reverts as usual to Christ, the central light about which the flame of her genius always flows and radiates:

After Adam, work was curse:
The natural creature labors, sweats, and frets.
But, after Christ, work turns to privilege,
And henceforth, one with our humanity,
The Six-day Worker working still in us
Has called us freely to work on with Him
In high companionship. So, happiest!
I count that heaven itself is only work
To a surer issue.

Built in the image of God, we should

work all silently
And simply, . . . as God does all;
Distort our nature never for our work,
Nor count our right hands stronger for being hoofs.
The man most man, with tenderest human hands,
Works best for men,—as God in Nazareth.

On the general relationships of people in the brotherhood of man she had many thoughts, and she gives them voice in some of the minor poems, but more especially in her comment on the career of Romney Leigh. The first great count against Romney Leigh, the hero of "Aurora Leigh," that long story in verse, is that his theories will not stand the test of experience. But that was, of course, intended by the author. He is not presented to us as an ideal, but as a failure. He committed the well-intended crime of trying to marry a child of the slums, not for love of her, but as a beginning of the new era; and it is meant that this well-meant wrong-headedness should fail. Nevertheless we respect him for his good intentions, and in the dark punishment that befell him when the misunderstanding people he had benefited arose in their uninstructed vengeance and burned the home he had made for them, bereaving him of sight in the holocaust, we have hearts full of pity for him. Moreover, in the absoluteness of his repentance we love him.

"I heard the cries
Too close,"

he says;

“I could not hear the angels lift
A fold of rustling air, nor what they said
To help my pity.”

And when he describes himself as being

“So truculent in assumption once,
So absolute in dogma, proud in aim,
And fierce in expectation,—I, who felt
The whole world tugging at my skirts for help,
As if no other man than I could pull,”

we do not feel that he deserves so intense condemnation. His motive had sprung from a sense of sympathy rather than from a trained intelligence; and that is an honorable source, if not the one from which flow the largest supplies of health-giving waters.

“And I, as man, . . . feel with men
In the agonizing present,”

he says to Aurora.

“The world was always evil,—but so bad?”

she asks. He answers in sad confirmation:

“So bad, Aurora. Dear, my soul is gray
With poring over the long sum of ill;
So much for vice, so much for discontent,
So much for the necessities of power,
So much for the connivances of fear,
Coherent in statistical despairs
With such a total of distracted life, . . .
To see it down in figures on a page,
Plain, silent, clear, as God sees through the earth,

The sense of all the graves,—that's terrible
For one who is not God, and cannot right
The wrong He looks on. May I choose indeed,
But vow away my years, my means, my aims,
Among the helpers, if there's any help
In such a social strait? The common blood
That swings along my veins is strong enough
To draw me to this duty."

Romney is called by the drawing-room gossip a Christian Socialist; but he is not that—except in the most sentimental and theoretical branch of those early idealists. There is an interesting German student in the room who comments and accuses:

"Who, getting to the top of Pisgah-hill,
Can talk with one at bottom of the view,
To make it comprehensible? Why, Leigh
Himself, although our ablest man, I said,
Is scarce advanced to see as far as this,
Which some are: he takes up imperfectly
The social question—by one handle—leaves
The rest to trail. A Christian socialist
Is Romney Leigh, you understand."

Later, the conceited German student lets off this fling:

"Leigh himself

Would fain be a Christian still, for all his wit."

The aspects of the social question touched upon in the plot and characterization and spirit of "Aurora Leigh" call our attention to a form of Christian socialism; but Mrs. Browning was no socialist as we understand the word to-day, or even

as she herself understood it. She said at one time: "I love liberty so intensely that I hate socialism. I hold it to be the most desecrating and dishonoring to humanity of all creeds. I would rather (for me) live under the absolutism of Nicholas of Russia than in a Fourier machine, with my individuality sucked out of me by a social air-pump." She believed in the individual life and in every scheme that would develop it to a still greater diversity and separateness. "A pale unanimity" in personality, in aspiration and endeavor, in attainment, or in system, was not attractive to her. It is a dominant and conscienceless time-spirit that in the "Rhapsody of Life's Progress" chants forth,

Who cares if the lightning is burning the corn?
Let us sit on the thrones
In a purple sublimity,
And grind down men's bones
To a pale unanimity.

In the following she emphasizes that thought which has become the fetich of myriads of sociological theory-makers since her time, and then, with her accustomed habit, swings over into an outlying realm of mysticism:

Each creature holds an insular point in space;
Yet what man stirs a finger, breathes a sound,
But all the multitudinous beings round
In all the countless worlds with time and place
For their conditions, down to the central base,

Thrill, haply, in vibration and rebound,
Life answering life across the vast profound,
In full antiphony, by a common grace?
I think this sudden joyance which illumes
A child's mouth sleeping, unaware may run
From some soul newly loosened from earth's tombs:
I think this passionate sigh, which half-begun
I stifle back, may reach and stir the plumes
Of God's calm angel standing in the sun.

Mrs. Browning would unite classes indeed, but not through any artificial means.

You will not compass your poor ends
Of barley-feeding and material ease,
Without the poet's individualism
To work your universal. It takes a soul
To move a body,—it takes a high-souled man
To move the masses, even to a cleaner sty:
It takes the ideal, to blow an inch inside
The dust of the actual: and your Fouriers failed,
Because not poets enough to understand
That life develops from within.

“Lady Geraldine’s Courtship” may be read by the side of the failure that Romney would have made had he carried on his plan.

In the development of life lies the principle that shall unify society. In “The Poet’s Vow” she emphasizes this thought still more. We are to “hold it in our constant ken” that

God’s own unity compresses
(One into one) the human many,
And that his everlastingness is
The bond which is not loosed by any:
That thou and I this law must keep,

If not in love, in sorrow then,—
 Though smiling not like other men,
 Still, like them we must weep.

In other words, our common experiences of sorrow should bind us together as a human family. In one of her letters she explains this: “I meant to express how that oneness of God ‘in whom are all things,’ produces a oneness or sympathy (sympathy being a tendency of many to become one) in all things. . . . The unity of God preserves a unity in men—that is, a perpetual sympathy between man and man. . . . I believe the subject itself involves the necessity of some mysticism.”

The unifying element in the theory of evolution may have reconciled her to the unpleasantnesses of its aspect as the “Vestiges of Creation” had first presented it to her imagination; and we find that she begins, in 1854, to take the long evolutionary view to which since Darwin we have become accustomed. If it takes seven men to make one pin, it may be possible that it will take

Seven generations, haply, to this world,
 To right it visibly a finger’s breadth,
 And mend its rents a little.

The thought of it fills her with impatience:

Oh, to storm
 And say, “This world here is intolerable;
 I will not eat this corn, nor drink this wine,
 Nor love this woman, flinging her my soul
 Without a bond for ’t as a lover should.”

Nor use the generous leave of happiness
As not too good for using generously"—

Nor

stand and claim to have a life
Beyond the bounds of the individual man,
And raze all personal cloisters of the soul
To build up public stores and magazines,
As if God's creatures otherwise were lost,
The builder surely saved by any means!

But then she finds herself face to face with the theological enigma:

To think,—I have a pattern on my nail,
And I will carve the world new after it
And solve so these hard social questions—nay,
Impossible social questions, since their roots
Strike deep in Evil's own existence here,
Which God permits because the question's hard
To abolish evil nor attaint free-will.

While she was writing out these perplexities she should have recalled that ten years before she had said in the "Drama of Exile":

I might say,
That who despairs, acts; that who acts, connives
With God's relations set in time and space;
That who elects, assumes a something good
Which God made possible; that who lives, obeys
The law of a Life-maker.

She should have remembered this! After all, trying to carve the world anew after a pattern on the nail, as Romney did, is not the way Christ intends, and Romney failed. Now at last, with blinded eyes, he sees that we must have

Fewer programs, we who have no prescience.
Fewer systems, we who are held and do not hold.
Less mapping out of masses to be saved,
By nations or by sexes. Fourier's void,
And Comte absurd,—and Cabet puerile.
Subsist no rules of life outside of life,
No perfect manners without Christian souls:
The Christ Himself had been no Lawgiver
Unless He had given the life, too, with the law.

This is the only socialism she knows—the spirit of love, the spirit of Christ, moving in the heart and unifying all that know and feel it.

To reach this end Mrs. Browning has no better panacea and medium to propose than through the development of individual character. And on this point her teaching grew to have a very sturdy quality. In two of the later poems, "Lord Walter's Wife" and "Bianca among the Nightingales," she shows that she believed with Robert Browning that to be afraid to do a great sin is one degree worse than to do the sin itself. And yet she speaks this stern warning:

There's not a crime
But takes its proper change out still in crime
If once rung on the counter of this world:
Let sinners look to it.

God's method is individual, for saints as well as sinners, and no one can sit

upon a high stool at a desk
To keep God's books for Him in red and black,
And feel by millions!

Moral death is more than physical—

For 'tis not in mere death that men die most,
And, after our first girding of the loins
In youth's fine linen and fair broidery
To run up hill and meet the rising sun,
We are apt to sit tired, patient as a fool,
While others gird us with the violent bands
Of social figments, feints, and formalisms,
Reversing our straight nature, lifting up
Our base needs, keeping down our lofty thoughts,
Head downward on the cross-sticks of the world.
Yet He can pluck us from that shameful cross.
God, set our feet low and our forehead high,
And show us how a man was made to walk!

The supreme thing to be gained from human experience is growth in character. "I wish to live just as long as and no longer than to grow in the soul," she said in the last year of her earthly life.

Therefore the only progress and happiness for the individual lies in satisfying the high demands of this exacting human soul and living out into expression the God-life within. With the fulfillment of this possibility and in the light cast upon us by immortality, all the human relationships are intensified in their meaning and in their sweetness. The most precious thing in human relationships is God's blessing. Do not thousands know this better for having given a loving farewell in these words of hers?

God be with thee, my belovèd,—God be with thee!

Else alone thou goest forth,

Thy face unto the north,

Moor and pleasance all around thee and beneath thee
 Looking equal in one snow;
 While I, who try to reach thee,
 Vainly follow, vainly follow
 With the farewell and the hollo,
 And cannot reach thee so.
 Alas, I can but teach thee!
 God be with thee, my belovèd,—God be with thee!

Love is the welding force of humanity, and “love believeth all things”:

Whoso loves
 Believes the impossible;

love “never faileth”; if it be love, it cannot die.

God is too near above, the grave beneath,
 And all our moments breathe
 Too quick in mysteries of life and death,

for such a word as “Loved Once”;

The eternities avenge
 Affections light of range.

To one who lives in the light of these revelations
 love becomes more than a rose-hued dalliance.

Love’s a virtue for heroes!—as white as the snow on high hills,
 And immortal as every great soul is that struggles, endures,
 and fulfills.

Moreover, it would be better for us to love well
 something ill than to love some good thing but a
 little:

Good love, howe’er ill-placed,
 Is better for a man’s soul in the end
 Than if he loved ill what deserves love well.
 A pagan, kissing for a step of Pan
 The wild-goat’s hoof-print on the loamy down,

Exceeds our modern thinker who turns back
The strata . . . granite, limestone, coal, and clay,
Concluding coldly with "Here's law! where's God?"

The unification of all the loves of life, and so of all life, is in the love of God; the human loves are of little value if they do not lead us to that love. Fathers' love does this in its measure and helps us to understand Him:

When fathers say "my child,"
'Tis easier to conceive the universe,
And life's transitions down the steps of law.

And if mothers' love is betrayed we may doubt the love of God also:

'Tis simple that betrayal by mother's love
Should bring despair of God's too;

that is, 'tis easy to understand how such a doubt could be harbored.

After all, the experience of Mrs. Browning became in the end a well-rounded one, and we find that she gives her "criticism of life" upon most of the fundamental things in human relationships. The relation of parent and child has a full commentary. That of father and child she touches rarely!—but upon child and mother the heart can be fully unloosed. It seems evident that such passages as the following can only have come from personal experiences:

I felt a mother-want about the world,
And still went seeking, like a bleating lamb,

Left out at night in shutting up the fold,—
 As restless as a nest-deserted bird
 Grown chill through something being away, though what
 It knows not.

And this:

The happy children come to us
 And look up in our faces;
 They ask us, “Was it thus, and thus,
 When we were in their places?”
 We cannot speak;—we see anew
 The hills we used to live in,
 And feel our mother’s smile press through
 The kisses she is giving.

Elizabeth Barrett missed her mother since her very early childhood; but although we hear little of that mother in the biographies of the poet, it is evident that she preserved a most tender memory of her.

Women know

The way to rear up children (to be just),
 They know a simple, merry, tender knack
 Of tying sashes, fitting baby-shoes,
 And stringing pretty words that make no sense,
 And kissing full sense into empty words,
 Which things are corals to cut life upon,
 Although such trifles: children learn by such,
 Love’s holy earnest in a pretty play
 And get not over-early solemnized,
 But seeing, as in a rose-bush, Love’s Divine
 Which burns and hurts not,—not a single bloom,—
 Become aware and unafraid of Love.
 Such good do mothers. Fathers love as well
 —Mine did, I know,—but still with heavier brains,
 And wills more consciously responsible,
 And not as wisely, since less foolishly;
 So mothers have God’s license to be missed.

And when Elizabeth Barrett gave a lock of her hair to Robert Browning it was, she assured him in one of the "Sonnets from the Portuguese," to find there

pure, from all those years,
The kiss my mother left here when she died.

None could set a higher value on mother's love than she.

'Tis simple that betrayal by mother's love
Should bring despair of God's too. Yet be taught,
He's better to us than many mothers are,
And children cannot wander beyond reach
Of the sweep of His white raiment. Touch and hold!
And if you weep still, weep where John was laid
While Jesus loved him.

This passage seems to show that she had the rare wisdom to see that mother's love is not infallible, although in another mood she expresses the conventional view that it is. Or perhaps the use of the idea is here dramatic only. Aurora Leigh is speaking to Marian Erle when she says:

"I thought a child was given to sanctify
A woman,—set her in the sight of all
The clear-eyed heavens, a chosen minister
To do their business and lead spirits up
The difficult blue heights. A woman lives,
Not bettered, quickened toward the truth and good
Through being a mother? . . . then she's none! although
She damps her baby's cheeks by kissing them,
As we kill roses."

"Then she's none": that is, then she is no real,

true mother—no mother in spirit and act. But many a woman is allowed by God to be legal mother who has not the first qualification for true spiritual motherhood. Yet legal motherhood ought to make mothers “low and wise.” Aurora looked with longing eyes to the fate of the happy mother,

With chubby children hanging on my neck
To keep me low and wise. Ah me, the vines
That bear such fruit are proud to stoop with it.
The palm stands upright in a realm of sand.

Aurora was that beautiful erect palm, but perhaps, after all, she would have chosen to be the bending vine. Once in the course of the story Aurora says,

You shall not speak
To a printing woman who has lost her place
(The sweet safe corner of the household fire
Behind the heads of children), compliments,
As if she were a woman.

In “Aurora Leigh” the struggle that goes on in the heroine’s breast between the impulses of artist and of motherhood-desiring woman can but be typical of the thoughts and feelings that Mrs. Browning herself had known, and that perhaps all artists that are women can at least understand. This problem Mrs. Browning lets Aurora sum up when she says:

Passioned to exalt
The artist’s instinct in me at the cost
Of putting down the woman’s, I forgot

No perfect artist is developed here
From any imperfect woman. Flower from root,
And spiritual from natural, grade by grade,
In all our life. A handful of the earth
To make God's image! the despised poor earth,
The healthy, odorous earth,—I missed with it
The divine Breath that blows the nostrils out
To ineffable inflatus,—ay, the breath
Which love is. Art is much, but Love is more.
O Art, my Art, thou'rt much, but Love is more!
Art symbolizes heaven, but Love is God
And makes heaven.

From her earliest girlhood writing, the feeling for motherhood was strong in Elizabeth Barrett. United with her religious devotion, it produced that enhaloed poem, "The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus," where angels unite with the divine mother to worship the Babe upon her lap.

The slumber of his lips meseems to run
Through *my* lips to mine heart, to all its shiftings
Of sensual life, bringing contrariousness
In a great calm. I feel I could lie down
As Moses did, and die,—and then live most.
I am 'ware of you, heavenly Presences,
That stand with your peculiar light unlost,
Each forehead with a high thought for a crown,
Unsunned i' the sunshine! I am 'ware. Ye throw
No shade against the wall! How motionless
Ye round me with your living statuary,
While through your whiteness, in and outwardly,
Continual thoughts of God appear to go,
Like light's soul in itself. I bear, I bear
To look upon the dropt lids of your eyes,
Though their external shining testifies
To that beatitude within which were
Enough to blast an eagle at his sun:

I fall not on my sad clay face before ye,—
I look on his. I know
My spirit which dilateth with the woe
Of his mortality,
May well contain your glory.
Yea, drop your lids more low.
Ye are but fellow-worshipers with me!
Sleep, sleep, my worshiped One!

The picture is rayed about with religious feeling, disarming criticism; technically it is, however, romantic in treatment (besides being theologically mystical)—how could it be otherwise, with such a subject? That other early poem about babyhood, “Isobel’s Child,” is even more so. Compared with the later child poems, it is rugged and artificial, yet its very quaintness adds a stately grace to its form, as the faces of the hinds in the background of some Holy Family make the simplicity of the Child’s face still more sweet. The young poet sat in her room and thought about children and then wrote. To her gentle imagination children lay for the most part in soft slumber and let the angels whisper to them in their dreams. In “A Child Asleep” she says:

Haply it is angel’s duty,
During slumber, shade by shade
To fine down this childish beauty
To the thing it must be made
Ere the world shall bring it praises, or the
tomb shall see it fade.

There are two childhood scenes in the earlier

poems that have a wistful pathos. One is in “Isobel’s Child” where comment is made upon the sleeping baby as it lies in the mother’s lap:

A solemn thing it is to me
To look upon a babe that sleeps
Wearing in its spirit-deeps
The undeveloped mystery
Of our Adam’s taint and woe,
Which, when they developed be,
Will not let it slumber so;
Lying new in life beneath
The shadow of the coming death,
With that soft, low, quiet breath,
As if it felt the sun;
Knowing all things by their blooms,
Not their roots, yea, sun and sky
Only by the warmth that comes
Out of each, earth only by
The pleasant hues that o’er it run,
And human love by drops of sweet
White nourishment still hanging round
The little mouth so slumber-bound:—

which makes one think of Aurora’s memory of her childhood when she sat among the little creatures of the field

In fellowship and mateship, as a child
Feels equal still toward insect, beast, and bird,
Before the Adam in him has foregone
All privilege of Eden.

The other notable childhood scene is in the “Drama of Exile” when Adam and Eve, expelled from Eden, stand looking down the avenues of the times-to-be and Eve perceives the “small hu-

manities" that are to be her human children. Each fragment in its way shows a profound insight. But the day of still stronger utterance came. She saw the children of the Ragged Schools, and she saw the "young, young" English children,

Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers
In our happy Fatherland;

she saw their young lives ground down in the English mines and machine-shops and factories, and their cry pierced to her heart.

"For oh," say the children, "we are weary,
And we cannot run or leap;
If we cared for any meadows, it were merely
To drop down in them and sleep.
Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping,
We fall upon our faces, trying to go;
And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,
The reddest flower would look as pale as snow.
For, all day, we drag our burden tiring
Through the coal-dark, underground;
Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
In the factories, round and round."

It was through the report to government by her friend Mr. Horne that she heard the cry of the children. The report sleeps in the government archives; but Mrs. Browning's poem not only went forth as a trumpet blast to call the sleeping heart of England to feel and to reform, but it echoes still in many a land beyond the English isles to

touch the springs of action to issues of justice for childhood.

It would indeed have seemed like a loss and misplacement of fate if a young woman who could write "The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus" and "A Child Asleep" should never have the joy of holding a child of her own in her arms, to place upon its brow a

mother's kiss,
Best thing that earthly is.

That Elizabeth Barrett should recover physical vigor enough to enter into marriage and to bear a child seems a veritable miracle—and it seemed so to her. Later, in the blissful experiences of her own life, she knew all that motherhood could teach. And then she could write of babyhood such a description as this:

There he lay upon his back,
The yearling creature, warm and moist with life
To the bottom of his dimples,—to the ends
Of the lovely tumbled curls about his face;
For since he had been covered overmuch
To keep him from the light-glare, both his cheeks
Were hot and scarlet as the first live rose
The shepherd's heart-blood ebbed away into
The faster for his love. And love was here
As instant; in the pretty baby-mouth,
Shut close as if for dreaming that it sucked,
The little naked feet, drawn up the way
Of nestled birdlings; everything so soft
And tender,—to the tiny holdfast hands,
Which, closing on a finger into sleep,[¶]
Had kept the mold of 't.

And this:

The light upon his eyelids pricked them wide,
And, staring out at us with all their blue,
As half perplexed between the angelhood
He had been away to visit in his sleep,
And our most mortal presence, gradually
He saw his mother's face, accepting it
In change for heaven itself with such a smile
As might have well been learnt there,—never moved,
But smiled on, in a drowse of ecstasy,
So happy (half with her and half with heaven)
He could not have the trouble to be stirred,
But smiled and lay there. Like a rose, I said?
As red and still indeed as any rose,
That blows in all the silence of its leaves,
Content in blowing to fulfill its life.

And yet again this:

While I, with shut eyes, smile and motion for
The dewy kiss that's very sure to come
From mouth and cheeks the whole child's face at once
Dissolved on mine,—as if a nosegay burst
Its string with the weight of roses overblown,
And dropped upon me. Surely I should be glad.
The little creature almost loves me now,
And calls my name, "Alola," stripping off
The *r*'s like thorns, to make it smooth enough
To take between his dainty, milk-fed lips,
God love him!

It was probably these passages that Swinburne had in mind when he said what is referred to in an earlier chapter in this book; and perhaps when one reads them, one must admit that perhaps the very essence of womanhood that seems to breathe from them comes more naturally from the hand and

heart of a woman than from those of a man however imaginative.

The wonderful passage in "Casa Guidi Windows" beginning,

The sun strikes, through the windows, up the floor;
Stand out in it, my own young Florentine,
Not two years old, and let me see thee more!—

is not quoted here in full since it is so familiar to all. Casa Guidi in this inspired passage may stand for Florence, Florence for the world.

Howe'er the uneasy world is vexed and wroth,
Young children, lifted high on parent souls,
Look round them with a smile upon the mouth,
And take for music every bell that tolls;
(WHO said we should be better if like these?)

.
Such cheer I gather from thy smiling, Sweet!

So children give to mothers strength and joy. Mothers are coadjutors of God, and can have a proof of the divine existence that others may not share.

"And so I lived for him, and so he lives,
And so I know, by this time, God lives too,"

said Marian Erle of her God-sent child. And the mother's love, the mother's joy, is something that can never be taken from her, no, not even if the beloved child passes on into the heavenly kingdom before the mother's weary steps can follow.

"God lent him and takes him," you sigh;
Nay, there let me break with your pain:
God's generous in giving, say I,—
And the thing which He gives, I deny
That He ever can take back again.

He gives what He gives. I appeal
To all who bear babes—in the hour
When the veil of the body we feel
Rent around us,—while torments reveal
The motherhood's advent in power,

And the babe cries!—has each of us known
By apocalypse (God being there
Full in nature) the child is our own,
Life of life, love of love, moan of moan,
Through all changes, all times, everywhere.

CHAPTER VII

MAN AND WOMAN

IT was good that the first great poet voice to speak for womankind was so well-toned and so sweet. It was good that the voice had been disciplined and modulated by the general experiences of the natural and normal woman—the comfortable home in childhood surrounded by many brothers and sisters, and following that the wifehood and motherhood; for any imperfection in these relationships might have altered the color of that voice and made it carry less far or pierce less deep. It was good, too, that the lower register of sorrow was added to the scope of the woman-poet's appeal; and how better could this have come than in just the ways it did—a worshiped brother's death, a father's tyranny, a delicacy of health that kept her for years face to face with the thought of death and in a familiar companionship with the spirits of the “heavenlies.” Everything seems to have been divinely educed and protected in order that the voice, when it came, should have the greatest weight with the world as the world was in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's century.

For these and many other reasons, no one could have been better qualified to speak of the problems of love than was Mrs. Browning. How she thought and felt in the earlier part of her life is written on the face of the "Drama of Exile." Here we see Adam and Eve at the extremity of the sword-glare outside the gate of Eden whence they have just been thrust. Eve is almost too exhausted by her grief to look up into Adam's face where the shadow is more to her than is the dim disappearing apex of those myriads of sad angels which shines high in the background. She confesses she has been not his Eve, his life, but his death, his undoer, and begs him in justice to punish her:

I do adjure you, put me straight away,
Together with my name! Sweet, punish me!
O Love, be just!

But Adam makes answer, not in any spreading magniloquence, but all simply:

My beloved,
Mine Eve and life—I have no other name
For thee or for the sun than what ye are,
My utter life and light! If we have fallen,
It is that we have sinned,—we:

the sin is upon both, says Mrs. Browning's Adam; he says

I am deepest in the guilt,
If last in the transgression.

He comforts her until it seems to her almost the voice of some saluting angel

calling home
My feet into the garden.

Clasped in his arms, she is renewed. Adam prays,

thankng Thee
That rather Thou hast cast me out with *her*
Than left me lorn of her in Paradise;

Because with *her*, I stand
Upright, as far as can be in this fall,
And look away from heaven which doth accuse,
And look away from earth which doth convict,
Into her face, and crown my discrowned brow
Out of her love.

And Eve,

Because I comprehend
This human love, I shall not be afraid
Of any human death.

Now again it will be true what was said at the beginning, it is not good for man to be alone. And later, when at the strange power of the word "love" the cursing Lucifer fades away and disappears, they learn together the meaning and power of human affection. The close of day comes on. Eve would travel back to the accustomed places in the nearness of Eden, but Adam encourages and sustains her spirit as the symbolic zodiac visions come to test their souls. Then in the final vision Adam is commanded to bless the woman; it is his office,

says Christ to him. Then follows that wonderful passage of about a hundred lines, which for lack of space we may not quote, but which must be commended to the mind and heart of every woman—and every man too—as an illuminated beatitude of womanhood; a *vade mecum* it ought to be, a sacred book-of-hours.

It was a delicate and penetrating touch in this characterization of Eve where she hears the sound of life-to-be and realizes the “steep generations” as they are to pass “adown the visionary stairs of time.”

Shall I be mother of the coming life?

she asks wistfully; and among all those phantasms of future beings that gather and pass before their eyes, those she would most long to have remain are the

small humanities

Which draw me tenderly across my fear,—
Lesser and fainter than my womanhood,
Or yet thy manhood—with strange innocence
Set in the misty lines of head and hand.

A womanly touch; and in answer to all the complainings of the Youthful Voices, the Poet’s, the Philosophic, and the Revel Voices, it is always the Infant Voices that sing,

Rock us softly,
Lest it be all in vain.

Certainly in a century and a half the Eve of poetry

has changed; she has acquired a loveliness, a sweet reasonableness, and a power that her Miltonic prototype did not possess. The Adam too, how much more of a man he is! How much more we can respect him! Less starch and buckram he has, to be sure, but he is more human, more for the uses of the world.

As time went on Mrs. Browning made many further studies of the problems of love in life. In "A Woman's Shortcomings" love is absolute, unquestioning. In "Isobel's Child" and in "Confessions" the failure of earthly love is depicted. "A Romance of the Ganges" is a tale of false human love—she has written little upon this phase. In "The Poet's Vow" she tries to show that the creature cannot isolate himself from his kind, and another phase—that creature cannot be sustained by creature—in "The Romaunt of Margret."

On many points Mrs. Browning could speak where, had her own marriage been less happy, her lips would have been sealed. For instance, it would have been difficult for her to take a point of view toward the matter of marriage such as is touched in the following passage in "Aurora Leigh":

Love, to him, was made
A simple law-clause. If I married him,
I should not dare to call my soul my own
Which so he had bought and paid for: every thought
And every heart-beat down there in the bill;

Not one found honestly deductible
From any use that pleased him! He might cut
My body into coins to give away
Among his other paupers; change my sons,
While I stood dumb as Griseld, for black babes
Or piteous foundlings; might unquestioned set
My right hand teaching in the Ragged Schools,
My left hand washing in the Public Baths,
What time my angel of the Ideal stretched
Both his to me in vain. I could not claim
The poor right of a mouse in a trap, to squeal,
And take so much as pity from myself.

We have already noticed one arraignment of Romney Leigh; a second count against him was that he did not take the same standpoint toward the work and position of woman that Aurora did—in fact, did not believe at all in what were then held to be the advanced standards in regard to her position in the social fabric. He was one of those who did not see how a woman could pass to greater intellectual heights without interfering with her values as wife and mother—most precious values to the world, he thought, and not to be sacrificed at any cost, even at the cost of the woman's individual advancement and equality of position. And his view of marriage was the current one of the common law, that gave largest right to the husband. So it was that the socialistic side of his theories could smother the claim of his heart and make him hold that

love's fool-paradise
Is out of date, like Adam's,

and theorize that

to wed

Requires less mutual love than common love
For two together to bear out at once
Upon the loveless many.

Hence the utterly unpractical suggestion of a marriage of classes and masses through Romney and Marian Erle, a daughter of the lowliest poor.

For a recluse, Mrs. Browning saw deeply into life as it was outside her invalid's door. Marriage among the better classes she saw to be to a great extent a matter of bargain—

so much love accord for so much love,
Rialto-prices. Are we therefore wrong?
If marriage be a contract, look to it then,
Contracting parties should be equal, just;
But if, a simple fealty on one side,
A mere religion,—right to give, is all,
And certain brides of Europe duly ask
To mount the pile as Indian widows do,
The spices of their tender youth heaped up,
The jewels of their gracious virtues worn,
More gems, more glory,—to consume entire
For a living husband: as the man's alive,
Not dead, the woman's duty by so much
Advanced in England beyond Hindostan.

Very much the same point of view is taken in one of her letters where she noted that a German professor selects a wife who can merely stew prunes—not because stewing prunes and reading Proclus make a delightful harmony, but because he wants his prunes stewed for him and chooses to read

Proclus by himself. A fullness of sympathy, she continues, a sharing of life, one with another, is scarcely ever looked for except in a narrow and conventional sense. Men like to come home and find a blazing fire and a smiling face and an hour of relaxation. Their serious thoughts and earnest aims in life, they like to keep on one side. And this is the carrying out of love and marriage almost everywhere in the world—and this, she adds bitterly, the degrading of women by both. Yet she could say, and say it emphatically, that she considered marriage the happiest state; and when a friend observed that she would walk like a pilgrim to the end of the world to find one who would love her and whom she could love, Mrs. Browning answered heartily, "That is the true feeling." The financial argument against marriage had little weight with her—her preaching as well as her practice showed this. In a discussion about one of Miss Mulock's heroes, who did not marry in the first volume because of a lack of income, she declared ardently that it ought rather to have been a matter of faith in God and in the value of God's gifts, "the greatest of which," she said, "is love." She continued: "A man's life does not develop rightly without marriage, and what is called an 'improvident marriage' often appears to me a noble, righteous, and prudent act. Your

Ninian was a man before he was a brother. I hold that he had no right to sacrifice a great spiritual good of his own to the worldly good of his family. . . . I don't like to see noble Ninians crushed flat under family Juggernauts from whatever heroic motives—not I." Again she gives this sound advice: "Be sure of him *first* and of yourself *chiefly*. For the rest I would marry . . . though the whole world spouted fire in my face. Marriage is a personal matter, be sure, and the wisest cannot judge for you. . . . People may live very cheaply and very happily if they are happy otherwise."

Upon the so-called social question she also held strict views finding expression sometimes in impassioned language. The respectable immorality of the "crooked world" which was

always hard upon the rent
In any sister's virtue! while they keep
Their own so darned and patched with perfidy,
That, though a rag itself, it looks as well
Across a street, in balcony or coach,
As any perfect stuff might,

received no allowance at her hands.

For my part,
I'd rather take the wind-side of the stews
Than touch such women with my finger-end!
They top the poor street-walker by their lie
And look the better for being so much worse:
The devil's most devilish when respectable.

Again she said: "War, war! It is terrible certainly. But there are worse plagues, deeper griefs, dreader wounds than the physical. What of the fifty thousand wretched women of the city? The silent writhing of them is to me more appalling than the roar of cannons."

What is the cure? For one thing, to let the facts be known and to face them. When Thackeray stained his record by refusing for the "Cornhill Magazine," of which he was editor at the time, to accept Mrs. Browning's "Lord Walter's Wife," with the excuse that the poem, though its moral was "pure, chaste, and right," would not be well received by his public, which was "squeamish," Mrs. Browning in a dignified and friendly letter wrote this: "I am deeply convinced that the corruption of our society requires not shut doors and windows, but light and air; and that it is exactly because pure and prosperous women choose to *ignore* vice, that miserable women suffer wrong by it everywhere."

Another remedial agency, she would certainly suggest, lies in the medium of education for women both high and low. It is natural to believe that Mrs. Browning held the most advanced views on this matter—advanced for her time, a time well before women had laid the ghost of impropriety that had stood at the drawbridge before they

quietly stormed the citadel of the man's university and, walking sedately in, had seated themselves in feminine dignity within those impregnable walls. Perhaps this figure of speech is not faithful to the pioneers, but it will answer as a summing up. Mrs. Browning lived before that day; at the time of its dawn she was an exile from the land where it was brighter than in any other on that side of the Atlantic, and so could not take part in the labors and interests of those pioneers that she surely would have taken had she been at home, and besides she was at the time fired with passion for other great causes. A woman of great learning—as far as learning can be gained from an almost unlimited mastery of the world's library of books—of an insatiable avidity for knowledge, and of a sympathy wide enough to embrace the whole world, to be interested in its least fact and to feel its least sorrow, Mrs. Browning, just by existing and by being the woman she was, gave the greatest possible contribution to the cause of education for woman. In the typical features of her life she gave example and in the free expression of her genius she gave proof of the power of a woman. As to what the education of a woman still was in her day, she has a few bitter words to say. But she does not harp on it—she touches and passes by:

A woman's always younger than a man
At equal years, because she is disallowed
Maturing by the outdoor sun and air,
And kept in long-clothes past the age to walk.

But she could not resist the ironic laugh that would come at the plans made in her day for the higher degree of the mature woman. Aurora Leigh runs over the course of study laid out for her by her English aunt.

I learnt the collects and the catechism,
The creeds, from Athanasius back to Nice,
The Articles, the Tracts, *against* the times
(By no means Buonaventure's "Prick of Love"),
And various popular synopses of
Inhuman doctrines never taught by John,
Because she liked instructed piety.
I learnt my complement of classic French
(Kept pure of Balzac and neologism)
And German also, since she liked a range
Of liberal education,—tongues, not books.
I learnt a little algebra, a little
Of the mathematics,—brushed with extreme flounce
The circle of the sciences, because
She disliked women who are frivolous.
I learnt the royal genealogies
Of Oviedo, the internal laws
Of the Burmese empire,—by how many feet
Mount Chimborazo outsoars Teneriffe,
What navigable river joins itself
To Lara, and what census of the year five
Was taken at Klagenfurt,—because she liked
A general insight into useful facts.
I learnt much music,—such as would have been
As quite impossible in Johnson's day
As still it might be wished—fine sleights of hand
And unimagined fingering, shuffling off

The hearer's soul through hurricanes of notes
To a noisy Tophet; and I drew . . . costumes
From French engravings, nereids neatly draped
(With smirks of simmering godship): I washed in
Landscapes from nature (rather say, washed out).
I danced the polka and Cellarius,
Spun glass, stuffed birds, and modeled flowers in wax,
Because she liked accomplishments in girls.
I read a score of books on womanhood
To prove, if women do not think at all,
They may teach thinking (to a maiden aunt
Or else the author),—books that boldly assert
Their right of comprehending husband's talk
When not too deep, and even of answering
With pretty “may it please you,” or “so it is,”—
Their rapid insight and fine aptitude,
Particular worth and general missionariness,
As long as they keep quiet by the fire
And never say “no” when the world says “ay,”
For this is fatal,—their angelic reach
Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn,
And fatten household sinners,—their, in brief,
Potential faculty in everything
Of abdicating power in it: she owned
She liked a woman to be womanly,
And English women, she thanked God and sighed
(Some people always sigh in thanking God!),
Were models to the universe. And last
I learnt cross-stitch because she did not like
To see me wear the night with empty hands
A-doing nothing. So, my shepherdess
Was something after all (the pastoral saints
Be praised for 't), leaning lovelorn with pink eyes
To match her shoes, when I mistook the silks;
Her head uncrushed by that round weight of hat
So strangely similar to the tortoise shell
Which slew the tragic poet.

We may be sure that Mrs. Browning took a dis-

tinct pleasure in writing that; but, though a devoted lover of Tennyson, she did not enjoy "The Princess" when it came out; its implied underestimate of women disappointed her; and she wrote to Miss Mitford: "What woman will tell the great poet that Mary Wollstonecraft herself never dreamt of setting up collegiate states, proctordoms, and the rest, which is a worn-out plaything in the hands of one sex already, and need not be transferred to be proved ridiculous?"

Yet, with all her claims for woman's rank in the intellectual world, Mrs. Browning cherished an intense dislike for the mannish woman, the woman's-rights woman, as her letters show, and, in those later days when all the world was coming to Florence to see if possible the Brownings, she would avoid meeting one of the strong-minded, even if necessary by persistent maneuvers. Her two sonnets on George Sand make this plain. Even more might be said. She did not even seem to mind it that her husband, if he pleased, might throw out of the window everything called hers, the moment after their marriage—interest and principal—but said calmly, "Why not?" and added, "Let what is mine be accepted as yours to the end." Again, she claimed that "there is a natural inferiority in the mind of woman—of the intellect—not by any means of the moral nature, and the

history of art and of genius testifies to this fact openly"; which, though perhaps we ought not to say it, reminds us of Portia's speech to her pretty Bassanio just after he, with the psychological and logical assistance of her clever ritual of musical accompaniment, had chosen the right casket. The wonder is that Mrs. Browning, with all her keen sense of the ludicrous, did not herself see the humor of the statement when made by her. If she had had a less humble idea of her own genius she probably would not have missed seeing that.

In her *esprit de sexe*, Mrs. Browning was not extravagant either way. She was not bigoted; she speaks of the "manly soul" of Charlotte Cushman—"manly, not masculine," she adds carefully; and she admitted that Miss Hosmer "emancipated the eccentric life of a perfectly 'emancipated female' from all shadow of blame by the purity of hers." As for herself, when she went to England she "packed eight thousand words" for herself "and eight thousand" for her husband, "besides seeing that they had shoes and stockings to go in and that Pennini's little trousers were creditably frilled and tucked." The letters show that this was typical. The humblest duties of the most conventional wife and mother she invariably laid upon herself as long as she lived.

If Mrs. Browning could not endure a manly

woman she had an equal detestation for a manly man, as the phrase is frequently understood. "I am not very fond of praising men by calling them 'manly,'" she said. "I hate and detest a masculine man. Humanly bold, brave, direct"—yes; but a man who was "ashamed to be happy beside a cradle" was not approved by her. All of which reminds us of the lines in Tennyson's "*Princess*" where he admonishes us not only that the woman must be more of man, but also that the man shall be more of woman. The man who is all masculine strength, without the complement of womanly refinement, is not the ideal of manhood in this woman-poet's eyes.

Mrs. Browning's claim for woman seems a simple one; she wished for her the right to work, and she wanted her work to be gauged justly, not as woman's work, but upon its own merits simply as work. "When I speak of women," she said, "I do not speak of them according to a separate peculiar and womanly standard, but according to the common standard of human nature." "I do not at all think that because a woman is a woman she is on that account to be spared the ordinary risks of the arena in literature or philosophy.... Logical chivalry would be still more radically debasing to us than any other." And Aurora, in her tragic self-communings, says:

Shall I fail?

The Greeks said grandly in their tragic phrase,
“Let no one be called happy till his death.”
To which I add,—Let no one till his death
Be called unhappy. Measure not the work
Until the day’s out and the labor done,
Then bring your gauges. If the day’s work’s scant,
Why, call it scant; affect no compromise;
And, in that we have nobly striven at least,
Deal with us nobly, women though we be,
And honor us with truth if not with praise.

These principles Mrs. Browning applied to work in literature chiefly, for that was where she was most at home. “Men and women of letters are the first in the world to me,” she said, “and I would rather be the least among them than ‘dwell in the courts of princes.’” Yet, she wrote again, “rather perish every word *I* ever wrote, for one, than help to drag down an inch that standard of poetry, which, for the sake of humanity as well as literature, should be kept high.” And one has but to recall the reviews of her early volumes—“an extraordinary volume as evidence of woman’s genius,” “a remarkable performance for a woman,” and so on—to realize how keenly she must have felt it when she wrote the following:

You never can be satisfied with praise
Which men give women when they judge a book
Not as mere work but as mere woman’s work,
Expressing the comparative respect
Which means the absolute scorn. “Oh, excellent,
What grace, what facile turns, what fluent sweeps,
What delicate discernment . . . almost thought!

The book does honor to the sex, we hold.
 Among our female authors we make room
 For this fair writer, and congratulate
 The country that produces in these times
 Such women, competent to . . . spell!"

The hour when she wrote that was a bitter one; but what a happiness would have been hers could she have foreseen that within a half century a man of letters would arise to write the following: "Mrs. Browning was a great poet, and not, as is idly and vulgarly supposed, only a great poetess. The word 'poetess' is bad English, and it conveys a particularly bad compliment. Nothing is more remarkable about Mrs. Browning's work than the absence of that namby-pamby elegance which the last two centuries demanded from lady writers."¹ To have had one line of a thoroughly fair and disinterested treatment such as this would have given her great cheer. As it was, she was sometimes able to gird herself through faith in God for the encounter with adverse conditions.

Be sure, no earnest work
 Of any honest creature, howbeit weak,
 Imperfect, ill-adapted, fails so much,
 It is not gathered as a grain of sand
 To enlarge the sum of human action used
 For carrying out God's end. No creature works
 So ill, observe, that therefore he's cashiered.
 The honest, earnest man must stand and work,

¹G. K. Chesterton, *Varied Types* (1905), p. 261.

The woman also—otherwise she drops
At once below the dignity of man,
Accepting serfdom. Free men freely work.
Whoever fears God, fears to sit at ease.

In the case of a woman who is an artist, Mrs. Browning thinks she sees a special difficulty. The artist, the poet, must generalize. Now, a woman is by nature an individualist. As a poet she must generalize; as woman she will persist in individualizing. The warfare must go on within her. Is there not the same contrariety in the nature of every man who is also a poet? Mrs. Browning thinks not—at least, the contrariety is not so keenly felt.

We women are too apt to look to one,
Which proves a certain impotence in art.
We strain our natures at doing something great,
Far less because it's something great to do,
Than haply that we, so, commend ourselves
As being not small, and more appreciable
To some one friend.

Perhaps this is true, and yet perhaps it is not always true. There was a man named Dante who “looked to one” and in him it did not prove a “certain impotence in art.” Instead it brought an organization and centralization of art into one great blossoming white rose of love and beauty. In Mrs. Browning’s castigations of her own sex—punishments we may believe to be intended for succeeding welfare—she generalized a little too swiftly. In

fact, a more full statement of the poet's duty and action is that he unites a process of generalization with one of individualizing and concretizing; and that neither is a matter of sex, after all, Mrs. Browning herself has done something toward demonstrating.

But whatever Mrs. Browning's theories were, in her life she illustrated and in her language she expressed what seems to us to be gloriously near to an ideal of the highest possible in the human pledge between man and woman.

In his late hour of clarified vision it was given to Romney Leigh to have a glimpse of what the "love of wedded souls" may be. "First, God's love," said Aurora, and he answered,

"And next, . . . the love of wedded souls,
Which still presents that mystery's counterpart.
Sweet shadow-rose, upon the water of life,
Of such a mystic substance, Sharon gave
A name to! human, vital, fructuous rose,
Whose calyx holds the multitude of leaves,
Loves filial, loves fraternal, neighbor-loves
And civic—all fair petals, all good scents,
All reddened, sweetened from one central Heart!"

"That mystery's counterpart!"—that is, the image and symbol in human life of what God's love may be as it broods upon the world. What this may mean as a woman poet can interpret it we see everywhere in Mrs. Browning's poetry, but

above all in that transfigured poem, the “Sonnets from the Portuguese”; for that is the name of a single poem—not of a collection of poems. It is one work, each stanza a rose in a chaplet of flowers. One single sweeping tide of emotion passes through these stanzas and welds them into perfect artistic unity. It is a lyric of love. The golden cord that binds the pearls into one chain is a slender thread of narrative, tenuous but definite. One may read the trembling first lines of this love story in a group of poems that are placed just before the “Sonnets” in the complete editions. These poems, that stand like an anteroom to a temple, are “Life and Love,” “A Denial,” “Proof and Disproof,” “Inclusions,” and “Insufficiency.” Then we take up the thread of the story itself, which we only need the love letters themselves to accentuate into electric clearness. She sits in her shadowed room and writes: (I) I thought, she says, that it was Death who stood awaiting me; I looked and lo, it was not Death, but Love! (II-V) But ah, I am too unworthy; to let thee love me, O princely Heart, would be to do thee a wrong; therefore go from me! (VI-VII) Yet if thou go, still hast thou changed for me my world, my life, my song! (VIII) And if I give nothing for the illumination thou hast given to me, shall I not be accounted ungrateful? Yet would it be right (IX) to give

what I can give? No, I must not! Yet I do love thee! And mere love itself (X) can glorify the unworthy. Therefore (XI) am I not all unworthy. I will love thee even while I renounce. (XII) Yet even my worthiness came from thee, since thy love for me made me give love to thee! But, (XIII) let me show a dauntless, voiceless fortitude; let not one word of mine convey how much I love, how much I grieve. (XIV-XXV) At last thy love hath prevailed against my fears. And now (XXVI) all my visions come true in thee; and thy love (XXVII) hath lifted me from death. In absence (XXVIII, XXIX) and in presence (XXX, XXXI) my fears are overcome by thy divine sufficiencies. I did fear because of the suddenness of thy love; but now I see (XXXII-XXXV) that a soul great enough can love greatly at a single stroke. (XXXVI) I did fear that this love would not last; now my faith is strong and serene. Yet let love be false rather than that thou shouldst lose one joy by keeping troth when love is cold. But oh, (XXXVII) pardon my doubts and fears! I take (XXXVIII) thy kiss of betrothal (XXXIX, XL) gratefully;—thou who art greater than all lovers of time past! (XLI) I thank all who have listened to my louder notes; but thou didst listen to the faintest—how can I thank thee? And oh that I might speak my soul's full meaning to future

years that they might give it voice and salute Love that endures, from Life that disappears! I leave my past behind (XLII); the future will be written anew in a love that is too deep and high and pure for all the days and ways of earth, and that after death will be only better and more perfect. (XLIII) For the flowers thou gavest, I give thee these flowers of verse; keep their colors true, Beloved; their roots are in my soul. (XLIV).

This is the framework; but what silver chain of thought can give any truthful impression of the globed pearls upon it! The wonderful sonnet-cycle cannot be quoted here; but, after all, why should it since this poem lies upon every table, is treasured in every heart? If we should select, we should not know which to take, nor would the anthologies help us, since nearly every sonnet in the whole poem has been first or last chosen out as a world's favorite; but perhaps the forty-third is the one that will gather the largest number of suffrages, and it is the one that makes the highest sweep of the circle upon the heavenly arch, the one where the potency of human love presses its certainty upon immortality:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

The name of Elizabeth Barrett Browning has in this year of grace become a fireside thought. She has come intimately close to us; she has spoken our own word for us in two separate hours of human experience—the two most essential and inevitable passages known to us, the hour of uplifted religious aspiration and the hour of purest human love. And these two she has united into one, so raising each into a still higher place and moving us with them to a realm of possible attainment that had waited many a century for her to speak, and when she spoke knew itself for the first time.

There are many traits in Mrs. Browning's poetry that show her kinship with the Elizabethans, as has been several times noted; and here is one in the "Sonnets" that is both Elizabethan and Petrarchan. The writers of the innumerable sonnet-cycles of the world's poetic past celebrated the beauty of their loves in verse that they gave solemn promise should to the honor of those lady-loves

endure forever. Shakespeare did not escape this obsession of the sonneteer, nor did Sidney. But the motif fades away on the lyre of Mrs. Browning to a faint strain and is transfigured into a melody of heaven.

Oh, to shoot

My soul's full meaning into future years,
That *they* should lend it utterance, and salute
Love that endures, from Life that disappears!

The “Sonnets from the Portuguese” is not a story of human love that closes with the page of human death; it is a poem of “love that endures,” that is to burn and glow forever along the immortal years. The poet’s wish now comes true: she *has* sent her meaning into future years; and we, because of her, are more steadfastly able to “salute Love that endures, from Life that disappears.”

CHAPTER VIII

PATRIOTISM AND POLITICS

IT seemed to Elizabeth Barrett Browning that her native England had

A sweet familiar nature, stealing in,
As a dog might, or child, to touch your hand
Or pluck your gown, and humbly mind you so
Of presence and affection, excellent
For inner uses, from the things without.

The description of a landscape or a scene in her native land had a lovingness in the very way of telling that is perfectly apparent in every touch. It evidently tastes sweet to her to speak of

the ground's most gentle dimplement
(As if God's finger touched but did not press
In making England), such an up and down
Of verdure,—nothing too much up or down,
A ripple of land; such little hills, the sky
Can stoop to tenderly and the wheatfields climb;
Such nooks of valleys lined with orchises,
Fed full of noises by invisible streams;
And open pastures where you scarcely tell
White daisies from white dew,—at intervals
The mythic oaks and elm-trees standing out
Self-poised upon their prodigy o' shade,—
I thought my father's land was worthy too
Of being my Shakespeare's.

This from her Italian Aurora; and she makes

Aurora confess that when the thrushes sang it
shook her pulses; and when the hedgerows were

all alive

With birds and gnats and large white butterflies
Which look as if the mayflower had caught life
And palpitated forth upon the wind,

she—standing “ankle-deep in English grass”—
“leaped and clapped” her “hands, and called all
very fair.” Then she cried,

“See! is God not with us on the earth?”

In “The Romaunt of the Page” a greenwood in
Palestine can but remind the hero

o’ the beechen-trees
Which in our England wave,
And of the little finches fine
Which sang there.

“Which in our England wave”! “Our Eng-
land”! “Belovèd England”! There was a deep-
seated patriotism in the heart of the author of such
lines.

All the more did it hurt her in the depths of her
nature if anything went wrong—as she saw the
wrong—with her “beloved England.”

Now, by the verdure on thy thousand hills,
Belovèd England, doth the earth appear
Quite good enough for men to overbear
The will of God in, with rebellious wills!

And her whole heart seemed to go out in the prayer,

I would, my noble England, men might seek
All crimson stains upon thy breast—not cheek.

From her early youth Elizabeth Barrett took an eager interest in the public affairs of her own country. Two poems and a long passage in a third are her gift to the young Queen Victoria, and her prayer was,

May the queen rejoice
In the people's liberties!

She had a keen ear for every word from London, whether it was about what Lord Melbourne had done or what the queen had said. "Do you approve of Prince Albert?" she asks one correspondent; and in her view of the Maynooth matter she shows a spirit of liberality which might perhaps not have been expected from one reared in so strictly sectarian a manner. Liberal in politics from the beginning, she was enthusiastic at the founding of the "*Daily News*," a paper which proposed an "ultraism at the right end," and which was to "help the people" and to "give a status to men of letters, socially and politically"; and she exhorted her friends to be good patriots and order that paper. The speeches of O'Connell she would not read, but kept her devotion, she said, for unpaid patriots. As early as 1841 she was finding serious fault with the English system. England's "fools," she said, "are lifted into chairs of state, her wise men waiting behind them, and her poets made Cinderellas of, and promoted into ac-

curate counters of pots and pans. . . . *Everything*,” she adds, “‘is rotten in the state of Denmark.’” This, says Horne, who quotes it, is probably the only attack on the government to be found in all her writings. One wonders what this early friend of hers would have said of the indictments in her later correspondence and the poems of her maturer years.

But it must be said—and let this be the first and the most abiding impression—that nothing ever did or could uproot that native mother-country love. She maintained from first to last an intense interest in all the public affairs of state; and in her letters to England from the adopted home in Italy, the question ever was, And what is the general feeling *now*? And as to Italy, the land that woos all, why,

Italy
Is one thing, England one.

To give up England, the “dear, dearest treasure of English love”—that would be impossible.

But there were reasons why the poet, thinker, and woman was shut off to some extent from sympathy with English affairs and relationships. In the first place, the climate of her native land seemed to be murderous to her frail physique. She declared that she would rather face two or three revolutions than an east wind of an English winter.

But the east wind was not the only thing. There was always an east wind for her in England—whether the sun shone or not—a moral east wind that was colder than any other. In fact, where love of country ought to be in the heart, there was in hers the mark of the burning iron, and the depth of the scar showed the depth of the root of it. So deep went the pain of that family separation that has been elsewhere referred to in this volume that she could only speak of certain ones as “the dead who live still.”

Then there were public criticisms she ventured to make. After comparisons in France and in Italy she could say: “We have some noble advantages over the rest of the world, but it is not all advantage. The shameful details of bribery, for instance, prove what I have continually maintained, the nonrepresentativeness of our ‘representative system’; and, socially speaking, we are much behindhand with most foreign peoples. Let us be proud in the right place, I say, not in the wrong.” These feelings she voiced in the Prologue to “A Curse for a Nation,” where she represents the poet as excusing herself from sending a reproof over the Western Sea on the ground that her own land was not free from blame. The poet says:

My heart is sore
For my own land’s sins: for little feet
Of children bleeding along the street:

For parked-up honors that gainsay
 The right of way:
For almsgiving through a door that is
Not open enough for two friends to kiss:

For love of freedom which abates
 Beyond the Straits:
For patriot virtue starved to vice on
Self-praise, self-interest, and suspicion:

For an oligarchic parliament,
 And bribes well-meant.
What curse to another land assign,
When heavy-souled for the sins of mine?

One wonders what may be meant by the words “bribes well-meant”; but the poet is speaking of her own native land, and that explains her shrinking from more explicit speech. The restraint is honoring to her heart, whatever the rumors were that helped to form the adverse judgment.

But there was still another quarrel that Mrs. Browning felt she had with England. After Florence had become a real home to her and Italy had been fully adopted into the heart, she longed for an advocacy of the Italian cause on the part of her native land which should be as passionate as her own. Disappointed in this, she had no patience with what seemed to her to be simply “doing a little dabbling about constitutions and the like where there’s nothing to risk.” “Why,” she asks, “does anyone say ‘God bless them’ for it! For my part,” she cried, “I never will forgive England the

most damnable part she has taken on Italian affairs, never. The pitiful cry of ‘invasion’ is the continuation of that hound’s cry, observe. Must we live and hear?”

These were the good and sufficient reasons that would have turned the thoughts of the really exiled poet more particularly to other countries than her own, even if she had not, from broad and generous impulses, been inclined to embrace the interests of those who stood outside of her own immediate circle. But her mind was perfectly elastic and could enlarge itself to inclose many nations. It was, in part, her great power of sympathy—that sympathy that we see running all through the whole story of Marian Erle—that led her to adopt even a foreign country as if it were her own. She looked upon each nation with which she came in contact, and in which therefore she was at once vitally interested, as a growing and developing thing, as a living creature whose education and progress she took the educationalist’s delight in watching, and if possible in aiding. She adopted the attitude of the missionary. Her ideal of a nation’s height in Christian civilization was formed. Her mind shaped out a plot of perfection by which it measured. She did this unconsciously, inevitably, irrevocably. Do the people understand

The serious sacred meaning and full use
Of freedom for a nation?

Feeling hers to be a voice—at least one—she holds herself responsible to the Great Justicers and must speak:

O Magi of the east and of the west,
Your incense, gold, and myrrh are excellent!—
What gifts for Christ, then, bring ye with the rest?
Your hands have worked well: is your courage spent
In handwork only? Have you nothing best,
Which generous souls may perfect and present,
And He shall thank the givers for? no light
Of teaching, liberal nations, for the poor
Who sit in darkness when it is not night?
No cure for wicked children? Christ,—no cure!
No help for women sobbing out of sight
Because men made the laws? no brothel-lure
Burnt out by popular lightnings? Hast thou found
No remedy, my England, for such woes?
No outlet, Austria, for the scourged and bound,
No entrance for the exiled? no repose,
Russia, for knouted Poles worked underground,
And gentle ladies bleached among the snows?
No mercy for the slave, America?
No hope for Rome, free France, chivalric France?
Alas, great nations have great shames, I say.
No pity, O world, no tender utterance
Of benediction, and prayers stretched this way
For poor Italia, baffled by mischance?
O gracious nations, give some ear to me!
You all go to your Fair, and I am one
Who at the roadside of humanity
Beseech your alms,—God's justice to be done.
So, prosper!

Toward America Mrs. Browning had a feeling

of gratitude, as did also her husband, and for the same reason, since both were accepted as poets by the American people before they were so received in their native land. The Americans were as good-natured to her as if they took her for the high radical she was, Mrs. Browning said. But the Brownings have not been the only British poets whose genius has been first recognized on this side of the dividing seas, and it was not her radical liberality that won to her the heart of America. Nor was it any palliation on her part of the faults in mother-England's child-nation. In fact, America caused the poet much anxiety, as a recalling of the events in the United States between 1850 and 1860 will make all too plain.

The author of "*The Cry of the Children*" could take but one position as to the inhumanity of the system of slavery. It is well known that the fortune of the Barrett family came from West Indian sources, and when in 1833 the bill was passed that set free the slaves in those islands and made commercial changes disastrous to the interests of all whose income depended on slave labor, Elizabeth Barrett wrote: "The late bill ruined the West Indians. That is settled. The consternation here is very great. Nevertheless I am glad, and always shall be, that the negroes are—virtually—free!" How sincerely and keenly she felt on

this subject is set down in a poem composed some years later called "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point," which was written at the request of some antislavery friends in America. Nobody would print it, she said, because she could not help making it bitter. If they did print it, she declared, she should think them more boldly in earnest than she fancied then that they were. And they did print it! In that poem, with an attempt at dramatic contrast, she makes the runaway woman-slave stand

on the mark beside the shore
Of the first white pilgrim's bended knee,
Where exile turned to ancestor,
And God was thanked for liberty;

and there the slave-woman cries back to the people the curses of the black race upon a nation that could hold them in slavery. These are the last three of the thirty-six stanzas:

Whips, curses; these must answer those!
For in this UNION you have set
Two kinds of men in adverse rows,
Each loathing each; and all forget
The seven wounds in Christ's body fair,
While HE sees gaping everywhere
Our countless wounds that pay no debt.
Our wounds are different. Your white men
Are, after all, not gods indeed,
Nor able to make Christs again
Do good with bleeding. *We* who bleed
(Stand off!) we help not in our loss!
We are too heavy for our cross,
And fall and crush you and your seed.

I fall, I swoon! I look at the sky.
 The clouds are breaking on my brain;
 I am floated along, as if I should die
 Of liberty's exquisite pain.
 In the name of the white child waiting for me
 In the death-dark where we may kiss and agree,
 White men, I leave you all curse-free
 In my broken heart's disdain!

Again she put the love of her American friends to the test. The poem this time was "A Curse for a Nation." It was printed in 1860—need anything more be said? The poem opens with a Prologue in which an angel commands the poet to speak:

I heard an angel speak last night,
 And he said "Write!
 Write a Nation's curse for me,
 And send it over the Western Sea."

I faltered, taking up the word:
 "Not so, my lord!
 If curses must be, choose another
 To send thy curse against my brother.

"For I am bound by gratitude,
 By love and blood,
 To brothers of mine across the sea,
 Who stretch out kindly hands to me."

"Therefore," the voice said, "thou must write." And no other excuses were accepted, not her own land's sins, not her woman's weakness; for, said the angel,

"A curse from the depths of womanhood
 Is very salt, and bitter, and good."

And so she was constrained to write the curse and send it over the Western Sea.

Because ye have broken your own chain
With the strain
Of brave men climbing a Nation's height,
Yet thence bear down with brand and thong
On souls of others;

because ye keep "footing on writhing bond-slaves," and "do the fiend's work perfectly in strangling martyrs"—

This is the curse. Write.

Then follows an arraignment which is like a scorching heat to draw forth disease. It was an electric searchlight cast upon the future and penetrating into the realms of the spiritual progress and development of a nation until it reached the place where new shames and new contritions should arise and make new anguish of heart:

Ye shall watch while kings conspire
Round the people's smoldering fire
And, warm for your part,
Shall never dare—O shame!
To utter the thought into flame
Which burns at your heart.

• • • •
Ye shall watch while nations strive
With the bloodhounds, die or survive
Drop faint from their jaws,
Or throttle them backward to death;
And only under your breath
Shall favor the cause.

Ye shall watch while strong men draw
The nets of feudal law
 To strangle the weak;
And, counting the sin for a sin,
Your soul shall be sadder within
 Than the word ye shall speak.

When good men are praying erect
That Christ may avenge his elect
 And deliver the earth,
The prayer in your ears, said low,
Shall sound like the tramp of a foe
 That's driving you forth.

When wise men give you their praise,
They shall pause in the heat of the phrase,
 As if carried too far.
When ye boast your own charters kept true,
Ye shall blush; for the thing which ye do
 Derides what ye are.

When fools cast taunts at your gate,
Your scorn ye shall somewhat abate
 As ye look o'er the wall;
For your conscience, tradition, and name
Explode with a deadlier blame
 Than the worst of them all.

Go, wherever ill deeds shall be done,
Go, plant your flag in the sun
 Beside the ill-doers!
And recoil from clenching the curse
Of God's witnessing Universe
 With a curse of yours.
 THIS is the curse. Write.

It must be said that to this day one reads these words with bated breath, and hides one's eyes

from the mere splendor of their moral height. Who else sounded a warning like this? Who else predicted such a following and working out of effects, who else at that time saw into the future with such a precision? No more perfect proof could be given of the power of the poet as seer than this one poem; and the fulfillment in some measure of the prophecy must be bitterly admitted even over the high banks and the smoking altars of repentance and expiation. Those most pregnant words,

Shall never dare . . .
To utter the thought into flame
Which burns at your heart,—

have not they been fulfilled in the literary and poetic dearth of the Southland? Yes, the author of this "Curse for a Nation" must stand with her who wrote the "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and with that other one who sang the Battle Hymn that flames with the passion of moral conquest, among the greatest of our great quickeners of the national conscience that lived and let their voices be heard just before the guns of Fort Sumter burst forth. Mrs. Browning lived to read an early volume of poems by Mrs. Howe and to become an admiring friend of Mrs. Stowe, but she did not live to see how much more "boldly in earnest" the American people were than she had dreamed of in 1847. To the end she was anxious. In December of 1860

she wrote: "If the North accepts such a compromise as has been proposed, the nation perishes morally—which would be sadder than a mere dissolution of the States, however sad. It is the difference between the death of the soul and of the body." Again she said: "Not that I despair for America—God forbid! If the North will be faithful to its conscience there will be only an increase of greatness after a few years, even though it may rain blood betwixt then and now." A few weeks later she wrote this: "I am anxious about the compromise in the North. All other dangers are comparatively null." Then, in April, 1861, but two months before her death, she said: "I fear they are not heroically strong on their legs on the *moral question*. I fear it much. If they can but hold up it will be noble." In the depths of their sorrow, Mrs. Browning's American friends could forgive the "Curse"; and the little doubt that went with her to the grave will be pardoned too when one remembers how dark was the sky in the year 1861.

And it *was* all forgiven! In the "little thin slice of a wicked book," as she humorously called it, which contained the "Curse for a Nation," there was other matter which Mrs. Browning knew would not help her reputation in England, but instead would make people say, "It's mad, and bad, and sad"; although she knew that they ought to

"*add that somebody did it who meant it, thought it, felt it, throbbed it out with heart and brain, and that she held it for truth in conscience and not in partisanship.*" In this spirit the poem on slavery was taken in the end. Mrs. Browning wrote to England: "That thin-skinned people the Americans exceed some of you in generosity, rendering thanks to reprovers of their ill deeds, and understanding the pure love of the motive. . . . The nation is generous in these things and not 'thin-skinned.'"

Mrs. Browning's many journeys in her later years through the more or less monarchical countries of western Europe left her as radical a republican as she had been in regard to the affairs of England and America. In France she stayed long enough to enter deeply into the life of the people; over the charm of Paris she waxed enthusiastic—that city so full of life that "it murmured of the intellectual fountain of youth forever and ever!" And everything in France had for her an interest only surpassed by that of her adopted home, Italy.

Many years before she ever crossed the Channel her physician had recommended Napoleon First as a fit subject for poetry. It was on the occasion of the removal of the dust of the dead monarch. The young poet had shed many a tear over the fate of that Great Failure, and now wrote the poem called

“Crowned and Buried.” To many words about the glory and the curse and the problem in that magic name of Napoleon she also added this:

I do not praise this man: the man was flawed
For Adam—much more, Christ!—his knee unbent,
His hand unclean, his aspirations pent
Within a sword-sweep— . . .

. . . But whether
The crowned Napoleon or the buried clay
Be worthier, I discern not: angels may.

It seems evident that the great Napoleon was no hero of hers. Of the Citizen King she had a better opinion. He was a “right royal king.” If France had borne more liberty, she said in October, 1844, he would not have withheld it, and, for the rest, and in all truly royal qualities, he was the noblest king, according to her ideas, in Europe—the most royal king in the encouragement of arts and literature, and in the honoring of artists and men of letters. Let a young and unknown writer, she continued, accomplish a successful tragedy, and the next day he would sit at the king’s table—not in a metaphor but face to face. “See how different the matter is at our court,” she said somewhat bitterly, “where the artists are shown up the back stairs, and where no poet (even by the back stairs) can penetrate, unless so fortunate as to be a banker also. What is the use of kings and queens in these days, except to encourage arts and letters?

Really I cannot see. Anybody can hunt an otter out of a box—who has nerve enough."

A trait like this would naturally attract the admiration of a poet, especially one who throughout life knew the necessity of the straitest economy in order to make ends meet. It was also a touch characteristic of Mrs. Browning, let it be said in passing, that when the matter of national endowments of poets came up in her correspondence, she should say, "What, and Carlyle unpensioned! Why, if we sate here in rags we wouldn't press in for an obolus before Belisarius!"

Mrs. Browning had great faith in the French people. Their very faults seemed to her to arise from an excess of ideality and aspiration.

This poet of the nations, who dreams on
And wails on (while the household goes to wreck)
Forever, after some ideal good,—

yet she believed the French nation to be a great nation; it will right itself under some flag, white or red, she said. And it was even in August of 1848 that she could say this. Mrs. Browning was in Paris at the time of the *coup d'etat* of December 2, 1851, and saw Louis Napoleon ride through one immense shout from the Carrousel to the Arc de l'Etoile. There was the army and the sun of Austerlitz, said she, and she thought it one of the grandest of sights; for he "rode in the name of the

people, after all." This is perhaps as good a summing up as could be made of her attitude toward Louis Napoleon; it was not an adoption of imperialism nor was it a "sycophancy of success." Taking her life as it is now so well known to the world, one must be accused of a high credulousness who sees other than the sincerest motive in her attitude on this matter. She believed France to be out and out the most democratic government in Europe; and the representative man in France, the incarnate republic, was Louis Napoleon.

And if at last she sighs
Her great soul up into a great man's face,
To flush his temples out so gloriously
That few dare carp at Cæsar for being bald,
What then?—this Cæsar represents, not reigns,
And is no despot, though twice absolute:
This Head has all the people for a heart;
This purple's lined with the democracy.

Again in "Napoleon III in Italy," published in 1860, she could still say a noble word for her hero:

Autocrat? let them scoff,
Who fail to comprehend
That a ruler incarnate of
The people must transcend
All common king-born kings;
These subterranean springs
A sudden outlet winning
Have special virtues to spend.

The people's blood runs through him,
Dilates from head to foot,
Creates him absolute,
And from this great beginning
Evokes a greater end
To justify and renew him—
Emperor
Evermore.

CHAPTER IX

THE ADOPTED LAND

THE name of the French Napoleon brings us to Italy. If Mrs. Browning had a weakness for Paris she had a passion for Italy—that “land of all men’s past,” that “piercing silence of ecstatic graves”! She loved the double rose of those Italian moons, the *issino* and *ino* and sweet poise of vowels in the Italian speech; her heroine “smiled like Italy”; and when she wished to put into a lover’s lips the sweetest words he could frame for the one beloved, she made him say the perfect name, “my Italy of women.”

As to Florence, she loved every cobweb and spider there; she loved the very stones of it, to say nothing of the cypresses and the river; Florence, she said, was her chimney corner where she could sulk and be happy. And it must be believed that the Italians fully reciprocated this affection. With the golden chain of her verse—“aureo anello”—she had united Italy and England—that land that, in the day of the southern nation’s need, had carried her rifles so thick that she must spare them in the cause of a brother! And when the English woman-poet died, the remembering and grateful

Florentines asked leave to inscribe on Casa Guidi, the house where the two poets for so many years lived, the following inscription:

QUI SCRISSE E MORI
ELIZABETTA BARRETT BROWNING
CHE IN CUORE DI DONNA CONCILIAVA
SCIENZA DI DOTTO E SPIRITO DI POETA
E FECE DEL SUO VERSO AUREO ANELLO
FRA ITALIA E INGHILTERRA
PONE QUESTA LAPIDE
FIRENZE GRATIS
1861¹

Behind the rather forbidding exterior of that house in Florence on the wall of which this inscription hangs, beat the great heart of a poet who could feel the woes of Italy as if they were her own; who put into practice the words of her preaching to her own country and to the world—

None fears for himself while he feels for another; and who gave, in effect, her life for her faith. Much was happening in Florence while they lived in that house, and silhouettes flashed out from those stirring times are found in "The Dance," "A Court Lady," "The Forced Recruit," "The King's Gift," "Parting Lovers," "Nature's Remorses," and elsewhere, every one being an impression rep-

¹ Here lived and wrote | Elizabeth Barrett Browning | who in the heart of a woman united (reconciled, conciliated) | the learning of a scholar and the spirit of a poet | and made with her verse a golden chain | between Italy and England | Placed this stone | grateful Florence | 1861

resenting a conviction in her, a word given out to get relief to her conscience and heart. In the preface to the volume of 1860 which contained many of these poems, she said: "What I have written has simply been written because I love truth and justice, *quand même*, more than Plato and Plato's country, more than Dante and Dante's country, more even than Shakespeare and Shakespeare's country."

If a country is the happiest when it has no history, the great unhappiness of Italy during the years when the Brownings resided there together may be known by the amount of history that was made there during that time. It is not in this chapter possible to go into the international complications between 1844 and 1861, for the Italian map during those years was a picture of international parterres where the colors of Austria (a yellow that Mrs. Browning's baby scorned to touch with the toe of his little shoe), of France, of Tuscany and Piedmont and the Papal realm, grew and flamed and kaleidoscopically changed from the Alpine fringes down to the very tip of the boot. Mrs. Browning came to Florence in 1847, and in the first part of "Casa Guidi Windows" shows how immediately and fully she gave the "blessing of her soul"

To this great cause of southern men who strive
In God's name for man's rights, and shall not fail.

But the Italian people did not at first engage her full respect. They were attractive and delightful, but wanted stamina. Revolutions were too frequent, too ill-timed, too futile. Every now and then a day would be fixed for a revolution in Tuscany, but a shower would put it off. One Sunday Florence was to be “sacked” by Leghorn, but a drizzle came and prevented. It was Grand Duke out, Grand Duke in; the bells in the church opposite Casa Guidi would ring for both. They planted a tree of liberty (“O bella!”) close to her door and then they pulled it down. The same tune, sung under the windows, did for “Viva la republica!” and for “Viva Leopoldo!” “O heavens, how ignoble it has all been!” she cried; “a revolution made by boys and *vivas* and unmade by boys and *vivas*—no, there was bloodshed in the unmaking—some horror and terror, but not so much patriotism and truth as could lift the blood from the kennel.” On the whole, however, she was hopeful in 1848:

Will, therefore, to be strong, thou Italy!
Will to be noble! Austrian Metternich
Can fix no yoke unless the neck agree.

Yet in a year’s time she was to see the “Austrian boar rake up the grape and olive gardens” of Italy with “his tyrannous tusk and roll on the maize with all his swine.” It was worse still to see the Austrian titles on the brow of the Grand

Duke Leopold. Then did her heart despair! The outburst of scorn and disgust in "An August Voice" shows what she felt at the suggestion that they should take back that Grand Duke! That "good, that excellent Grand Duke," she had called him; now he had nailed their flag to the mast and then softly scuttled the boat!

As to Pio Nono, she deeply pitied him. She thought him a weak man with the noblest and most disinterested intentions; but she was to give up faith in him also. When the threat was sent to him that all in the Quirinal should be killed unless he accepted their terms, he should have gone out to them, she said, and so died; but having missed that opportunity, nothing remained for him but flight. And in 1850 she came to the point where she could say that the only evident truth bright and strong enough to cling to was that the Papacy had forever lost its prestige and power over souls. In her pictures of the friars in the processions that went by the windows of Casa Guidi, in "Christmas Gifts," in "A View across the Roman Campagna," and elsewhere, she gives her opinion in full upon this subject. If ever there was a holy cause, she thought, it was this; if ever there was a war on which one might ask God's blessing, it was this. After a while she began to see that the afflictions of ten years were ripening the souls of the

Italian people. The elemental new springs of life were gushing everywhere. All internal jealousies came to an end, all suspicions were quenched, all selfish policies were dissolved. Florence forgot herself for Italy, and all seemed glad to sink their

separate lives for the sake
Of one sole Italy's living forever!

Nobody any more could say that the Italians fought ill. Garibaldi had only volunteers, not trained troops; there was no such page of glory in the whole history of France; and then she paid to the "lion-heart" of their leader the tribute of a noble poem. Her faith in Napoleon III was perfect; she looked upon him as a disinterested friend of a beautiful and unfortunate country, and hailed the tricolor as a symbol of noble rescue. She saw in dreams her Italy as a white-robed lady with a white mask on her head in the likeness of a crown. With this mystic woman she was walking on the mountains of the moon. She was hand in hand with a dream more beautiful than them all. The dream she shares with us in "Italy and the World," a poem that is one wave of oratory swept onward to the poetic plane. Florence, Bologna, Parma, Modena—you who are English, she cries, saw them as graves and thought there was naught to do but to sort your sables for their funerals; you who are English might mourn on sure and steady; the cock

of France might crow, but that did not prove that it was the morning for resurrection; then, suddenly, the trumpet sounded and these graves were opened!

Life and life and life! agrope in
The dusk of death, warm hands, stretched out
For swords, proved more life still to hope in,
Beyond and behind. Arise with a shout,
Nation of Italy, slain and buried!

Hill to hill and turret to turret
Flashing the tricolor,—newly created
Beautiful Italy, calm, unhurried,
Rise heroic and renovated,
Rise to the final restitution.

Then the field of her vision is enlarged and she sees the beloved country as a leader of others, as a star of progress to the whole world:

Rise; prefigure the grand solution
Of earth's municipal, insular schisms,—
Statesmen draping self-love's conclusion
In cheap vernacular patriotisms,
Unable to give up Judæa for Jesus.

Bring us the higher example; release us
Into the larger coming time:
And into Christ's broad garment piece us
Rags of virtue as poor as crime,
National selfishness, civic vaunting.

No more Greek nor Jew then,—taunting
Nor taunted;—no more England nor France!
But one confederate brotherhood planting
One flag only, to mark the advance,
Onward and upward, of all humanity.

For civilization perfected
Is fully developed Christianity.
“Measure the frontier,” shall it be said,
“Count the ships,” in national vanity?
—Count the nation’s heart-beats sooner.

Uplifted by these thoughts of what may be, she sees an almost millennial mission in the future of her Italy.

Earth shall bless you, O noble emenders
On egotist nations! Ye shall lead
The plow of the world, and sow new splendors
Into the furrow of things for seed,—
Ever the richer for what ye have given.

Then at last,

Each Christian nation shall take upon her
The law of the Christian man in vast:
The crown of the getter shall fall to the donor,
And last shall be first while first shall be last,
And to love best shall still be, to reign unsurpassed.

For months the poet moved exalted in the midst of such dreams. It seemed to her as if she walked among the angels of a new-created world. And then came the blow—the peace of Villafranca! “It fell like a blow upon us all,” she said, “and, for my part, you may still find on the ground splinters of my heart, if you look hard.”

Peace, peace, peace, do you say?
What!—with the enemy’s guns in our ears?

she cried in “First News from Villafranca”; and it is not too much to say that the violent mental

agitation, the reaction from a state of exultation and joy in which she had been walking among the stars for so many months, and the grief and anxiety, the struggle, the talking, all coming at a moment when the ferocious heat had made her body peculiarly susceptible, were the direct occasion if not the entire cause of the illness that led to her death.¹ One afternoon she went to the Trollopess, had sight of the famous Ducal orders about bombarding Florence, and came home to be ill. One long struggle with weakness followed, and continued to the end. She might have said with Giulio's lover:

Dear God! when Italy is one,
Complete, content from bound to bound,
Suppose, for my share, earth's undone
By one grave in't—

why

thus, of noble Italy
We'll both be worthy! Let us show
The future how we made her free,
Not sparing life . . . ,
Nor this . . . this heartbreak!

A volume of "Last Poems," published after her death, contained "King Victor Emanuel Entering Florence, April, 1860," "The Sword of Castruccio Castracani," "Summing Up in Italy," and several

¹See her letters to Mrs. Jameson of August 26, 1859, and to Mrs. Martin of September, 1859, in Letters, ed. Kenyon, vol. i, pp. 324-333.

others, all of which show how true to the end was her heart. To this, "Be witness, Cavour!" Writing on the day after the death of that statesman, she said: "I can scarcely command voice or hand to write *Cavour*. That great soul, which meditated and made Italy, has gone to the diviner country. If tears or blood could have saved him, he should have had mine. . . . May God save Italy," she added. This was in the last letter of her recorded correspondence and but twenty-two days before her death, which took place on the twenty-ninth of June, 1861.

During all the troublous years of their residence in Italy fear never drove them away from the city, and Mrs. Browning had a nearer touch with actual war than many a poet has had. In the volume of "Last Poems" her "Mother and Poet" sums up the case against war as a woman may. "O Christ," wept that mother of two sons slain at Ancona and Gaeta,

O Christ of the five wounds, who look'dst through the dark
To the face of thy mother! consider, I pray,
How we common mothers stand desolate, mark,
Whose sons, not being Christs, die with eyes turned away,
And no last word to say!

In "Parting Lovers" she gives another lesson even more forceful. It would not be like Mrs. Browning not to hate war itself with a great hatred. We find that it was the one subject upon which she

and her lover differed before their marriage—though one must believe there were many afterward, else how could the marriage have been so ideally happy? In “Casa Guidi Windows” she says:

I, too, have loved peace, and from bole to bole
 Of immemorial undeciduous trees
Would write, as lovers use upon a scroll,
 The holy name of Peace and set it high
Where none could pluck it down.

But then she adds forcefully:

On trees, I say,—
Not upon gibbets!—

nor dungeons, nor chain-holts, nor starving homes!
To her Tuscans she brings this high advice:

Ye bring swords,
My Tuscans? Ay, if wanted in this haze,
Bring swords: but first bring souls!—bring thoughts and
 words,
Unrusted by a tear of yesterday’s,
Yet awful by its wrong,—and cut these cords.

Arbitrate if possible, she would have said; but after all war is not the worst thing that may befall, as a passage from a letter written in 1855 shows clearly that she believed. There it is the silent writhing of the wretched poor in the peaceful city that calls forth her pity. She was also to see the silent writhing of a whole people; but when there was made what she believed to be

a most unworthy and disgracing peace she cried aloud,

Rather the raking of the guns across
The world, and shrieks against Heaven's architrave—

than such a peace!

By Christ's own cross,
And by this faint heart of my womanhood,
Such things are better than a Peace that sits
Beside a hearth in self-commended mood,
And takes no thought how wind and rain by fits
Are howling out of doors against the good
Of the poor wanderer.

This is not peace; 'tis a mere counterfeit;

'tis treason, stiff with doom,—
'Tis gagged despair and inarticulate wrong,—
Annihilated Poland, stifled Rome,
Dazed Naples, Hungary fainting 'neath the thong,
And Austria wearing a smooth olive-leaf
On her brute forehead, while her hoofs outpress
The life from these Italian souls, in brief.

And then she argues it out while the Austrian guns
were pointing her way:

Children use the fist
Until they are of age to use the brain;
And so we needed Caesars to assist
Man's justice, and Napoleons to explain
God's counsel, when a point was nearly missed,
Until our generations should attain
Christ's stature nearer. Not that we, alas,
Attain already; but a single inch
Will raise to look down on the swordsman's pass,
As knightly Roland on the coward's flinch:

And, after chloroform and ether-gas,
We find out slowly what the bee and finch
Have ready found, through Nature's lamp in each,
How to our races we may justify
Our individual claims and, as we reach
Our own grapes, bend the top vines to supply
The children's uses,—how to fill a breach
With olive-branches,—how to quench a lie
With truth, and smite a foe upon the cheek
With Christ's most conquering kiss. Why, these are things
Worth a great nation's finding, to prove weak
The "glorious arms" of military kings.
And so with wide embrace, my England, seek
To stifle the bad heat and flickerings
Of this world's false and nearly expended fire!

Then a few lines further on she sends this message to her own native land:

O my England, crease
Thy purple with no alien agonies,
No struggles toward encroachment, no vile war!
Disband thy captains, change thy victories,
Be henceforth prosperous as the angels are,
Helping, not humbling,

and thus find that peace is not a thing to be sought

'Twixt the rifles' click and the rush of the ball,

'Twixt the dying atheist's negative
And God's Face—waiting, after all!

CHAPTER X

ART AND LIFE

WHAT Mrs. Browning has said of artistic theory, and of the poet's character, mission, and message, would in itself make the basis of a large treatise; it cannot, however, be attempted here to do more than merely to touch upon the heavenward side of her artistic philosophy.

From the days when as a little child she used to sit, doll in arms, in a corner against the wall, with eyes dreaming up to a high window of stained glass—as someone remembers seeing her—she was a dreamer and a lover of poetry. She wrote poetry—verses she calls it—at eight years old and earlier. At last this childhood fancy turned into a will and remained with her, and from that day on poetry was a distinct object with her, an object to read, think, and live for. After this unconscious decision she became resolute to work whatever faculty she had clear from imitations and conventionalism. After her great sorrow in the death of her brother she declared that a part of her was worn out; but the poetical part—that is, the love of

poetry—was growing in her as freshly and as strongly as if it were watered every day. In 1841 she wrote to Hugh Stuart Boyd that she cared as much for poetry as ever, and could not more.

Her love for poetry was perfectly disinterested; poetry was rather a passion than an ambition to her, as it is with every real poet, and the gadfly which drove her along that road pricked deeper than an expectation of fame could do. She loved poetry better than she loved her own successes in it. She felt that she must have definite work and thought in poetry—"else I should perish," she said. So much for the necessity and desire and joy that drove her to her art.

No one could, it seems, have claimed in mature thought more for poetry and the poets than did this first woman to be really great among them. She herself took the poet's mission as a holy chrism upon the brow. To her the poet's work was no light work. His wheat, she thought, will not grow without labor any more than other kinds of wheat, and she held that the sweat of the spirit's brow is wrung by a yet harder necessity. At an early point in her poetic career she reflects that the poetic fire is "one simple and intense element in human nature," having its source in the "divine mysteries of existence"; and she expresses her ardent belief in the "mystical effluence of poetry,"

which she calls "a highest height over the highest height." She tries to understand herself, to fathom this wonderful "effluence," this miracle of inspiration. But when in answer to Robert Browning's observation that "the more one sits and thinks over the creative process, the more it confirms itself as inspiration, nothing more nor less," she is not able to come any nearer to a definite statement than to say assentingly that she thinks the "creative process" to be "just inspiration and no less," and to add that our very inability to analyze the mental process is only a proof of the contention that it is from the divine. Then follows that impressive account of the creative process which all poets must acknowledge to be a description that comes home. She describes it as being a "gathering of light on light upon particular points as you go (in composition) step by step, till you get intimately near to things and see them in a fullness and a clearness and an intense trust in the truth of them which you have not in any sunshine of noon (called *real!*) but which you have *then.*" It is, in fact, to her mind, pure revelation. The poet is essentially the God-possessed man. If he is really "artist-born" he is born into a "round of crystal conscience," and has a religious passion in his soul. In a very special sense he stands in the place of God to men.

Why, God would tire of all his heavens, as soon
As thou, O godlike, childlike poet, didst
Of daily and nightly sights of sun and moon!
And therefore hath He set thee in the midst
Where men may hear thy wonder's ceaseless tune
And praise his world forever, as thou bidst.

Every part of the poet's activity is associated with that God-life within the human casket. When a vision comes to the poet it is as the "sweet slow inbreak of angels, whitening through the dim." And when this outer circumambient life of vision and perfectness presses through to the poet's soul, it is then that he speaks and bears witness to the reality of that higher sphere. This is what Mrs. Browning believed, and she could not account for the facts in any other way.

Art's the witness of what Is
Behind this show. If this world's show were all,
Then imitation would be all in Art;

but it is not; artists witness

for God's
Complete, consummate, undivided work.

This world is a symbol of another, and artists, "whose spirit sense is somewhat cleared," may catch at something of the bloom and breath till people say "a man produced this" when they should say "'tis insight and he saw this."

Thus is Art
Self-magnified in magnifying a truth
Which, fully recognized, would change the world
And shift its morals;

if men could feel

The spiritual significance burn through
The hieroglyphic of material shows,

all men were poets, and the millennium would be at hand!

The soul of the artist is the reservoir and the standard-bearer of truth, and he speaks highest only when he expresses the realness of his inner self in the fullest degree. This was her theory. In a letter written in 1860, the year before her death, she said: "If anything written by me has been recognized by you, the cause is that I have written not to please you or any critic, but the deepest truth out of my heart and head. I don't dream and then make a poem out of it. Art is not either all beauty or all use, it is essential truth that makes its way through beauty into use." Here she comes to the heart of the matter; and her own literary history exemplifies the dictum; for that poem of hers that came from the deepest depth of her own experience is the one read longest by the largest number of people, the one to be published over and over when its original copyright had expired by the largest number of publishers and to be treasured by the greatest number of people—and withal by those of the most diverse tastes and most widely separated interests. It is not necessary to name the work—the "Son-

nets from the Portuguese," that purest and most perfect love-poem in any language. In this work Elizabeth Barrett dipped to the very source, the deep subterranean spring of her own heart. She did "look in her heart and write," as Sir Philip Sidney would have advised. And in a crystal goblet of delighting and almost absolutely flawless form, clear as clearness itself, and marked everywhere with such a grace as perfectly sincere emotion can mold and evolve for itself when working through the poetically trained and practiced mind, she unconsciously made for the world a draft that was healthful and inspiring, a taste of something that the knowing world will not as yet leave off desiring—will not, perhaps, forever. Therefore as to their message, poets are

the only truth-tellers now left to God,
The only speakers of essential truth,
Opposed to relative, comparative,
And temporal truths; the only holders by
His sun-skirts, through conventional gray glooms;
The only teachers who instruct mankind
From just a shadow on a charnel wall
To find man's veritable stature out
Erect, sublime,—the measure of a man,
And that's the measure of an angel, says
The apostle.

Compared with what poets have to say to us, laying telegraphs, gauging railroads, reaping, dining, are not the imperative labor, after all. In fact she

in a measure takes from her conception of divine qualities to build her conception of the human poet and then enlarges this conception until she faces this "Great Perhaps."

What if even God
Were chiefly God by living out Himself
To an individualism of the Infinite,
Eterne, intense, profuse,—still throwing up
The golden spray of multitudinous worlds
In measure to the proclive weight and rush
Of his inner nature,—the spontaneous love
Still proof and outflow of spontaneous life?

So again we find her reaching out her hand into the cool limbo of mysticism; and it seems certain that she would have gone further but that some stern milestones of Christian teaching led her feet in another direction.

In accord with this conception of the poet's relation to the universe of God, standing almost as a spokesman for Him to the human race, she holds that the meaning of the world of nature ought to be well understood by him. Mrs. Browning does make this claim, and she calls upon the poet to render the meaning of nature and the universe plain to the world of laymen:

There's not a flower of spring
That dies ere June but vaunts itself allied
By issue and symbol, by significance
And correspondence, to that spirit-world
Outside the limits of our space and time,
Whereto we are bound. Let poets give it voice
With human meanings.

But Mrs. Browning, the recluse, is more likely to argue from poetry to the world of nature than from the world of nature to poetry. "If poetry under any form be exhaustible," she said, "Nature is; and if Nature is—we are near a blasphemy—I, for one, could not believe in the immortality of the soul." With her, whatever way the course of the argument was led, the step was upward and heavenward. The passage in "*Aurora Leigh*" (VI, 148-204) where Aurora contrasts the point of view of the scientist with that of the poet is interesting as showing the author's accurate philosophical analysis and also her appreciation of the scientist's point of view; her attitude is, in fact, one of especial courtesy to those holding a group of interests and talents respected by her intelligence though not preferred by her heart. The poet cares less for *all* nature than the scientist; less for the vast aggregations and for the one that represents the mass; but he cares infinitely more for the one fact, the one person, the one thing, considered quite by itself and in its own individual being. She will not claim it as a strength that she would rather "track old Nilus to his silver roots," than "pore upon an ounce of common, ugly, human dust." Perhaps it is a weakness: she will profess it, anyway! The upshot of the argument is, however—one expects inevitably this conclusion from her—that the *word*

of the poet is more than the *fact* of the man of science. "Virtue's in the word!" But she does not go so far as to remember that the poet's word itself is a "fact" to the man of science and subject to his analysis also.

Then we come around to the practical use of the poet to the world. But

plant a poet's word even, deep enough
In any man's breast, looking presently
For offshoots, you have done more for the man
Than if you dressed him in a broadcloth coat
And warmed his Sunday pottage at your fire.

Here, then, the poet and the philanthropist meet.

Art is much, but Love is more.
O Art, my Art, thou'rt much, but Love is more!
Art symbolizes heaven, but Love is God
And makes heaven.

In spite of these almost haughty demands for the artist and his rank in the world's hierarchies, she claims also that he must place his feet upon the earth, not in the clouds. In the last words of Aurora to Romney before they resigned love and came to grief, she says:

Reflect, if Art be in truth the higher life,
You need the lower life to stand upon
In order to reach up unto that higher;
And none can stand a-tiptoe in the place
He cannot stand in with two stable feet.
Remember then!—for Art's sake, hold your life.

For

What is art

But life upon the larger scale, the higher,
When, graduating up in a spiral line
Of still expanding and ascending gyres,
It pushes toward the intense significance
Of all things, hungry for the Infinite?
Art's life,—and where we live, we suffer and toil.

Yes, poets of the true stripe will be democratic
and will be on terms of love with the whole world.

Poets become such

Through scorning nothing. You decry them for
The good of beauty sung and taught by them,
While they respect your practical partial good
As being a part of beauty's self. . . .
When God helps all the workers for his world,
The singers shall have help of Him, not last.

Naturally, then, this poet would claim all the universe as unrestricted realm for her lawful working. “All truth and all beauty and all music belong to God—He is in all things; and in speaking of all, we speak of Him. In poetry, which includes all things, ‘the diapason closeth full in God.’ I would not lose a note of the lyre, and whatever He has included in His creation I take to be holy subject enough for me.” Again she cries: “O poet, do you not know that poetry is not confined to the clipped alleys, no, nor to the blue tops of Parnassus hill? Poetry is where we live and have our being—wherever God works and man understands.” She distrusted the poet who could discern no character

nor glory in his times; her own faith in human kind was so profound that she could say,

All actual heroes are essential men,
And all men possible heroes.

But it was the soul of man that interested her, not his external deeds and adventures. Therefore she was impatient with the "toys of simulated stature, face, and speech," found in the acted drama, and wished poets to

take for a worthier stage the soul itself,
Its shifting fancies and celestial lights,
With all its grand orchestral silences
To keep the pauses of its rhythmic sounds.

It seems evident that she is here describing exactly what Robert Browning did exclusively and what she herself also did in large measure. Her earlier sketches of personalities stand outlined in tints that are only shadowy; the Onoras, and Berthas, and Geraldines, and other ladies of paynim lands and romantic earldoms. In this group, however, one must make exception of her Eve, a character which is like one of those ancient and perfect miniatures, done in silvery grays but distinct as one might imagine an angel would be against a background of full sunlight. But when we come to "Aurora Leigh" we enter a world of more distinct characterization. Aurora herself, the ample and mothering, the discriminating and

yet passionate Aurora, who read Fourier and the other socialists, not, like Lady Waldemar, to gain a smattering to gild her conversation withal, but to find a reasonable channel for her overflowing pity —this wonderful woman stands as the consummate achievement of Mrs. Browning's dramatic presentation. Very subjective, to be sure, was this expression, yet the vision of Aurora that arises to our memory is not the slight figure of the poet herself, advancing from a shadowed couch draped with Indian shawls, and, as she reaches forth to us a pair of small “spirit” hands, giving a glimpse, between curls that shower down on either side of the face, of a pair of wonderful dark eyes full of lustrous welcome. No: the conception of Aurora is large and strong, quick to answer in witty repartee (Mrs. Browning was full of fun, too, and her letters sometimes glitter with witticisms), but gliding instantly into tenderness and sympathy; moreover capable (as was Mrs. Browning, one need not say) of full and sweeping whirlwinds of holy indignation. It has been pointed out as a defect in Aurora that she was too hard upon that English aunt of hers; but it should be remembered that Aurora is represented as speaking from the stand-point of mature life—the time when she is writing out the story of her unhappy childish days of exile in the lonely English home—and, also, that

she has now imbibed those enlarging and strengthening ideas of social equality. The characterization is all the more expert, technically, with this quality than it could have been without. The irony of the passage in the First Book, lines 297-309, is inimitable, and explains in full these conflicting strains in the character of the two women. The portrait of that aunt is, in fact, a masterpiece; so is also that of "this poor, good Romney," the idealizing, pig-headed Romney. Among persons somewhat less prominent in the story stands Lord Howe, who "set his virtues on so raised a shelf," he had to "mount a stool to get at them"; and Lady Howe, who was not proud—

Not prouder than the swan is of the lake
He has always swum in; 'tis her element;
And so she takes it with a natural grace,
Ignoring tadpoles.

Then there is Lady Waldemar, conciliatory, flowery, and—rotten; "You know the sort of woman—brilliant and out of nature." And there was many a minor character silhouetted against the background: Lucy Gresham, the sempstress, and the coarse woman that kept the house where she lived and died; Grimward the reporter with his "low carnivorous laugh"; Sir Blaise with the "top-attic head," and so on. And now and then a neat little picture is welded in somewhere, like that, for in-

stance (in "Aurora Leigh," VII, 1239-56), of the Italian woman so old that "to kneel grew easier than to stand," who would surely "win a tern in Thursday's lottery"—one of those poor blind souls that "writhe toward heaven along the devil's trail."

Her descriptions of slum life do not in general hold us as do those taken from the high-class realms to which this poet was more accustomed; they were less imaginably accurate. How could it be otherwise? Yet Marian Erle, though distinctly of the realm out of which she came when she touched the life of Aurora, is even more appealing than perhaps any other in the book. Marian Erle, in her gown of serge, was nowise beautiful; she had eyes that smiled remembering they had wept. She used "meek words that made no wonder of herself for being so sad a creature!" What other words could so perfectly have described that air of calm unresisting patience which we so often observe in the demeanor of the absolutely suppressed, that extinction of the sense of justice which should keep alive the feeling of revolt, that cessation of bitterness because of its very fruitlessness! The story of Marian Erle, which lies at the base of the story of Romney and Aurora, is a romantic and a thrilling one, and through it the pure self of Marian shines everywhere with a pale sweetness. As she told to Aurora the tale of her

childhood and of Romney, “strong leaps of meaning” came in her “sudden eyes.” At last Aurora saw that Marian Erle

was beautiful.

She stood there, still and pallid as a saint,
Dilated, like a saint in ecstasy,
As if the floating moonshine interposed
Betwixt her foot and the earth, and raised her up
To float upon it.

Among the other characters to whom Mrs. Browning pays her respects in passing is a friend or two from the other side of the water:

Delia Dobbs, the lecturer from “the States”
Upon the “Woman’s question”;—

the name of this female being not only a bit of mischief, but also a true expression of her creator’s dislike for the “Strong-minded.” Better natured, perhaps, is her reference to the American girl, to whose delicate beauty Mrs. Browning was one of the first to give literary regard. Aurora sets down, in this life history of hers, Lord Howe’s suggestion that he will bring to show off to her his

transatlantic girl, with golden eyes,
That draw you to her splendid whiteness as
The pistil of a water-lily draws,
Adust with gold. Those girls across the sea
Are tyrannously pretty,—and I swore
(She seemed to me an innocent, frank girl)
To bring her to you for a woman’s kiss.

In some respects the characterization is even racial, if admittedly partial.

In Mrs. Browning's latest group of poems the characterizations are more impressionistic but not less distinct. Teresita, "my Kate," Agnes, the "white rose," and the lover of Giulio; she who was "mother and poet" and passionate patriot; Lord Walter's wife, penetrating, acid, noble; the forced recruit whose musket had never been loaded; the Court Lady with her tawny hair and purple eyes, passing theatrically through the hospital wards —each character is individualized to the point of realism and the picture is etched in its outlines like the shadow of leaves upon the pavement. In all such pictures taken from the passing panorama of life it was the soul that interested the artist and made the picture worth while. In this her philosophy and her practice were one.

'Tis impossible
To get at men excepting through their souls,
However open their carnivorous jaws;
And poets get directlier at the soul
Than any of your economists—for which
You must not overlook the poet's work
When scheming for the world's necessities.

And again:

Art's a service,—mark:
A silver key is given to thy clasp,
And thou shalt stand unwearied, night and day,
And fix it in the hard, slow-turning wards,
To open, so, that intermediate door

Betwixt the different planes of sensuous form
And form insensuous, that inferior men
May learn to feel on still through these to those,
And bless thy ministration.

Mrs. Browning sees her philosophy of life and its issues written large across the face of things, but it is seen through a medium of the artist's inspiration. It is, in fact, seen through a double medium. Not only must life be seen as a poet sees it, but it must be seen too as Christ sees it. She would work a union of the attitude of Christian and of poet in order to make a rightly balanced judgment upon the structure of society and the destiny of man. If the reign of Christ in men's hearts could be established perfectly all men would look upon the world and its activities in the same way that the artist does, with the same wonder, the same ecstasy, the same single-mindedness. Then all action would be based upon justice and love, and divine law would be perfectly obeyed, because the divine life would take its place in all human relationships and activities. It was therefore a true expression of her whole philosophy when she made the Poet Voices in the "Drama of Exile" drift by upon these words:

O we live, O we live—
And this life that we conceive
Is a noble thing and high,
Which we climb up loftily
To view God without a stain.

CHAPTER XI

THE POET'S MISSION

IN a volume of Christina Rossetti's poems William Watson in 1884 wrote this quatrain:

Songstress, in all times ended and begun
Thy billowy-bosomed fellows are not three.
Of those sweet peers the grass is green o'er one,
And blue above the other is the sea.

Judging by the echoes that have rippled along over the centuries from the voice of Sappho, one would think that she emphasized the love side of human life, while Christina Rossetti certainly gave most thought to religious aspiration. The third in this trio stood firmly upon the earth, yet dared to look into the face of heaven. The poem which will be her best chord in the orchestra of poets, the "Sonnets from the Portuguese," is not only a love story—though it is that and the loveliest ever written; it is a poem upon life, death, and immortality. It is a story of heaven upon earth and in heaven. That poem does not lose its hold upon the world as time goes on. In this the one-hundred-and-first year after her birth we find that myriads of publishers, great and small, are putting forth edition after edition of the "Sonnets from the Portu-

guese." The poem is seen in all styles and at every price, from the dime booklet to the edition de luxe; and this means that it stands on the shelf in every home, however small, however rich; and that her pure and health-giving spirit is moving on in the progressive life of new generations.

But the "Sonnets from the Portuguese" is not the only work of hers that the people love. In a recent volume of the "Best Short Poems of the Nineteenth Century," compiled on the suffrages of a large number of poetry lovers, "A Musical Instrument," by Mrs. Browning, was the tenth in order in the list, and "A Court Lady" was the nineteenth. There were also two by Robert Browning, "Prospice" and "The Lost Leader." The list included twenty-two by men and three by women, the third in the latter class being "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," by Mrs. Julia Ward Howe. If the list had included "The Other World" or "Only a Year," by Harriet Beecher Stowe, it would have contained something from each of the three most influential women writers of the past century. There were two by Keats, four by Tennyson, three by Wordsworth, in the collection, and the other names included were these: Bourdillon, Bryant, Emerson, Holmes, Leigh Hunt, Kingsley, Newman, Poe, Shelley, Blanco White, and Wolfe. There was also a sup-

plementary list which contained Mrs. Browning's "A Valediction" and "Crowned and Buried," together with ten others by Browning. In this list also appeared the names of Longfellow, Whittier, Lowell, Coleridge, Byron, Landor, Watson, Rossetti, Scott, and Swinburne.

To a reader of her complete works it seems strange that "A Musical Instrument" and "A Court Lady" should have been the two poems taken for this list; "The Cry of the Children" and "The Sleep" would seem to have been better known. But this is a mere personal judgment. An examination of many English anthologies, where she is, of course, always represented, shows that different poems are nearly always selected by different critics. There is in her case, as in that of Robert Browning and many others of the greater poets, no one poem that stands so far above the others as to be invariably chosen. Representative expressions of taste like the above may be thought inconclusive, but a new valuation is due every half century or so to each poet of worth. At any rate, we of the twentieth century make judgment of ourselves by stating what we now think of those who have been valued in the past.

Mrs. Browning had little conceit in regard to her own abilities, although her critical faculty was

highly developed and her judgments upon her literary contemporaries time has proved to be almost unerring. Her learning was almost vast. The list of books she read in literature, philosophy, and science is amazingly large. The worlds of the ancient classics were open to her as well as those of the French, German, Italian, Spanish, and other languages. She made also modest estimate of her powers as a poet—much to her disadvantage as far as her early fame is concerned. In 1844 in a sonnet called “The Soul’s Expression” she wrote:

With stammering lips and insufficient sound
I strive and struggle to deliver right
That music of my nature;

and this image of the priestess possessed with a passion for expressing a message which she lacks power to breathe forth gave a suggestion to a long procession of her rapacious critics which inspired them through many a succeeding year. Yet in the year 1850, when Wordsworth’s death left the laureateship vacant, Mrs. Browning had received sufficient appreciation from the world for her name to be urged for that post of honor by so influential a paper as the London *Athenæum*, a suggestion that, judging by her letters, made but the merest ripple upon her calm. Still, amid the unfairness of criticism from which she nearly always suffered, it must have been a comfort to

her. It is only now—more than forty years after her death—that justice begins to be done to the prophetic modernness of her rhythms, and to the organic individuality of her selection in sounds and of her poetic grouping. But little did she really care for the critics. To possess the joy of creation was enough bliss for the poet—he should ask no other, she thought. All the vicissitudes of the literary life she and her poet-husband knew well, including poverty; but these did not count with her. God had given to her the divine faculty of the poet and the responsibility was upon her to show her gratitude. To Robert Browning she said: “Remember, as you owe your unscathed joy to God, you should pay it back to His world.” And she took this advice home to herself. This was what she felt was to be done by her—to pay it back to His world. “If a poet be a poet, it is his business to work for the elevation and purification of the public mind.” It is his business—yes; but it is also his joy. And so the army of poets will march singing around the walls and see them fall. The “fiery finger” of art will “pierce to the center,”

and break up ere long
The serfdom of this world.

Everything about the poet’s work and the poet’s inspirations was a matter of sacred mission to her. Even her rhymes were to her a question of con-

science. Unbound by scholastic traditions, her ear-sense was unprejudiced, and she honestly thought that she could enlarge the capacity of English resources for poetic use by adopting assonances and free rhymes. Many people do not understand this. Many people think that she rhymed *silence* with *islands* and *compresses* with *lastingness* because she did not know any better, or, worse still, because she had a defective ear. Neither was the case. If she had had the technical education as education has been in the schools of her time, she would have known that rhyme is a matter that goes down to the racial foundations of mankind and changeth not at the suggestion of any individual. To know the power of the swift current of a river where it runs between walls of rock, one must not only stand upon the cliffs and look; one must put in one's hand and feel the invisible compulsion. Mrs. Browning stood and looked, and pretty soon she saw her little shallop of a new idea come to grief—in fact, to ruin. She wept a tear or two, metaphorically speaking, and then not another. After that she gave to the world at the height of her powers an example of pure limpid measures vitally organized in the “Sonnets from the Portuguese,” and in “Aurora Leigh” she announces her very modern theory that form will be the outgrowth of the thought.

Trust the spirit,
As sovran nature does, to make the form,
says Aurora,

For otherwise we only imprison spirit
And not embody. Inward evermore
To outward,—so in life, and so in art
Which still is life.

There was one ear at any rate to which the music of her poetry was “more various and exquisite than any modern writer’s”—namely, Robert Browning’s. Perhaps this will be thought not to count, but the opinion was set down near the beginning of the first volume of the love-letters, in June, 1845, when their story was still in the friendship chapter. At a later date Browning said: “I am only a painstaking fellow. Can’t you imagine a clever sort of angel who plots and plans and tries to build up something—he wants to make you see it as he sees it—shows you one point of view, then carries you off to another, hammering it into your head the way he wants you to understand; and while this bother is going on God Almighty turns you off a little star—that’s the difference between us. The true creative power is hers, not mine.” It must be believed that Browning believed this, and we love and honor him the more for it, and do not respect his judgment less though we may think he was wrong in this matter. Mrs. Browning was nearer to a true estimate when

she thought her husband's powers to be greater than her own. She was one of the earliest appreciators of his genius; and he said of her, "Her glories shall never fade." And who shall say which was right? A much longer time must elapse before a question like that can be decided, and perhaps it never can be settled. To-day the readers of Robert Browning are invincibly attached to him; but there are probably a thousand who read the "Sonnets from the Portuguese" to one who reads any one poem of his; and there will always be an audience, if perhaps a different one, for each. Ruskin, in that philanthropic Appendix to the "Elements of Drawing," recommended the two Brownings among the poets best to know, and, with pardonable overpartiality, added that Mrs. Browning's "Aurora Leigh" was so far as he knew the greatest poem which the century had produced in any language. "It is of the greatest importance to you," he said, "not only for art's sake but for all kinds of sake, in these days of book deluge, to keep out of the salt swamps of literature and live on a little rocky isle of your own, with a spring and a lake in it, pure and good." To a parent or teacher, or to anyone interested in the growth of pure minds under the influence of pure literature, it is a comfort to know of such a little rocky isle with a spring and a lake

pure and good to which one may lure away a friend or pupil; and certainly the author of the "Sonnets from the Portuguese" is such an isle and lake. Sincere as a preraphaelite, though revolutionary as a "romanticist," Mrs. Browning is spiritual always in her theories of art as well as in her theories of life. As was said in an earlier chapter, she was a part of the great contemporary movement to respiritualize the church and the world. Her little life with its unequal physical sustainment was blown upon by divine fire, and then it became an illumination shining transfigured in the realm of poetry and nobly defiant for the claim of the soul's serious concerns to a place among the inspirations of the artist. She has been many times called a daughter of Shakespeare; if she deserves this name she is sister also to Milton and to Dante: she must stand in the group of those poets to whose eyes the gates of heaven have stood open, who have looked within, and who have then reported to us something of what has thus been revealed to them.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

1806, March 6. Elizabeth Barrett Moulton Barrett born at Kelloe, near Durham, England.

1809-29. At Hope End, Ledbury, in the Malvern Hills.

1814. From eight years old on she is writing verse.

1820. Fifty copies of her four-book epic, "The Battle of Marathon," published by her father.

1824. It is thought that the injury to her back while trying to saddle her pony was received about this time.

1826. "Essay on Mind with Other Poems" published anonymously.

1828. Death of her mother.

1829-32. Financial trouble leads her father to leave Hope End. Residence for a time in Sidmouth.

1833. "Prometheus Bound," translation, published with other poems, by the author of "Essay on Mind."

1833, August. Act for a future and progressive emancipation of slaves in the Colonies. This act became operative in 1834.

1835-46. Residence in London for the most part till her marriage. Period of settled invalidism.

1838. "The Seraphim and Other Poems," by E. B. Barrett, published. First work published with her name.

1838. Formation of the great friendships with John Kenyon, Mary Russell Mitford, Mrs. Jameson, and others.

1840, July 11. Death of her brother by drowning at Torquay, where they were staying for a time for her health.

1839-45. Correspondence with Richard Hengist Horne.

1842. "The Greek Christian Poets" and the "Book of the Poets" published in London Athenæum.

1844. "Poems" by E. Barrett Barrett. First edition.

1846, September 12. Marriage of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. From then till her death residing at Florence, Italy, with summers in the hills of Italy and occasional visits to Rome, and to France and England.

1847. "Sonnets from the Portuguese" first privately printed.
1849, March 9. Birth of her son.

1850. Second edition of her collected poems, containing a retranslation of the "Prometheus Bound."

1851. "Casa Guidi Windows" published.

1857. "Aurora Leigh" published.

1857. Death of her father.

1859. Peace of Villafranca.

1860. "Poems Before Congress" published.

1861, June 29. Death of Mrs. Browning at Florence.

1862. "Last Poems," published by Robert Browning.

1863. "Greek Christian Poets and the English Poets" ("The Book of the Poets") published by Robert Browning.

1877. "Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning" published.

1899. "Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning" published.

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